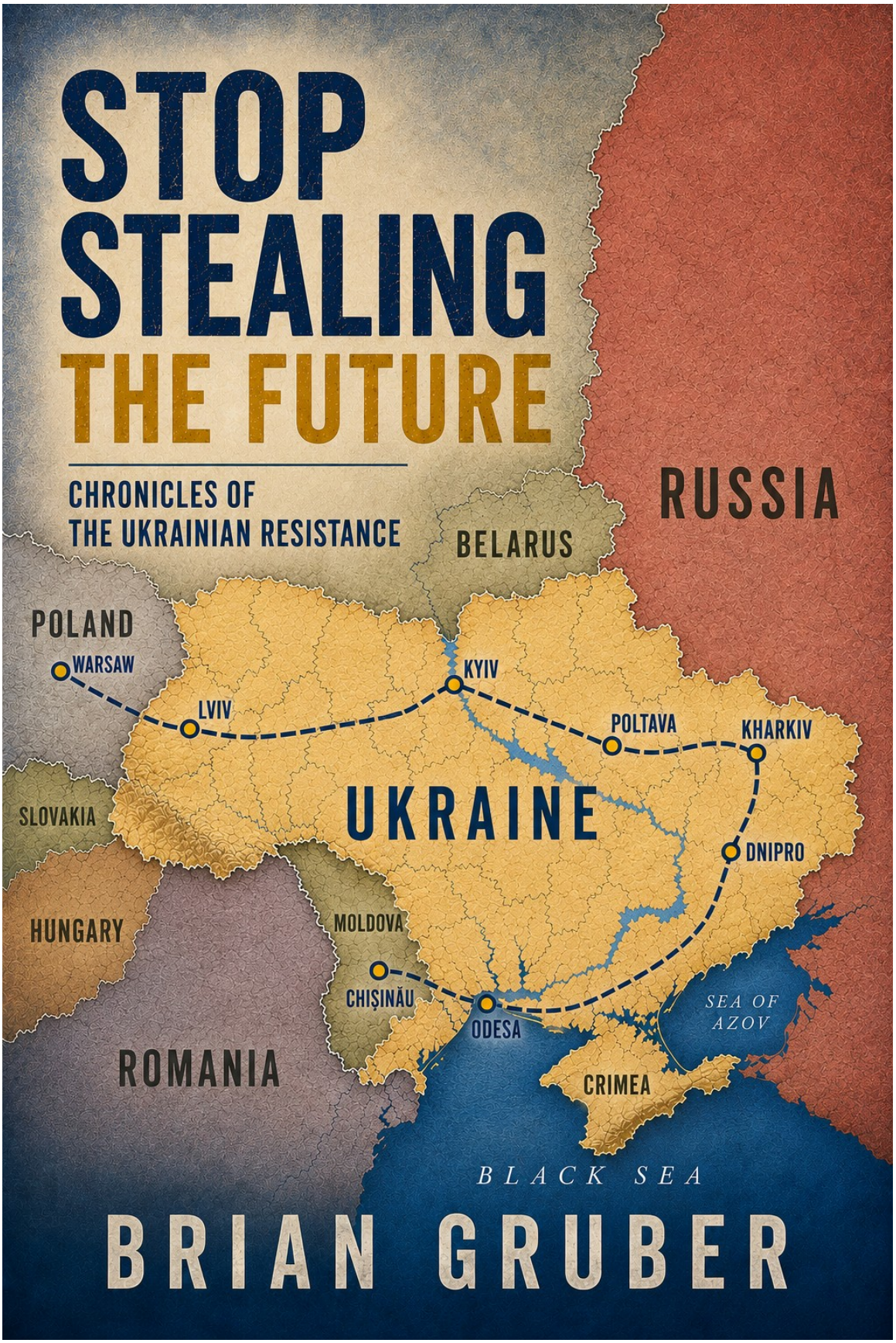
STOP
STEALING
THE FUTURE
CHRONICLES OF
THE UKRAINIAN RESISTANCE
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AZOV
ROMANIA
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BLACK SEA
BRIAN GRUBER

Stop Stealing the Future:

Chronicles of the Ukrainian Resistance

by Brian Gruber

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INTRODUCTION

On February 28, 2025, U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance publicly humiliated visiting Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in the Oval Office, dismissing his invitation to witness the devastation of the Russian invasion as a “propaganda tour.” It was cruelty and confession in a single sneer—confirmation that my country had chosen its alignment.

So I decided to embark on my own propaganda tour.

I had been to Ukraine before, in 2019, while researching *Surmountable*, a book on successful citizen movements. Walking through Kyiv, interviewing women and men who had fiercely resisted Russian domination after a century of forced famines, brutal repression, and degradation, I arrived at an epiphany: Ukrainians love and understand liberal democracy with a ferocity that exceeds that of most Americans. In the months when hundreds of thousands braved freezing winter cold on the Maidan, they were not just resisting—they were building models of activism, solidarity, and citizen engagement that the rest of the democratic world might notice.

I left for Ukraine on August 4, 2025, my seventieth birthday, to gather and amplify Ukrainian voices of resistance. Over three weeks, traveling overland from Warsaw through Lviv, Kyiv, Poltava, Kharkiv, Dnipro, and Odesa, I spoke with journalists, soldiers, volunteers, artists, teachers, doctors, filmmakers, athletes, and ordinary citizens navigating daily life during the first major ground invasion on the European continent since World War II.

What I found was clarity, humor, grief, creativity, and an unsentimental commitment to survival and self-determination.

These conversations explore war and resistance, but also culture, memory, loss, and hope. They are offered as a tribute to the courage and perseverance of the Ukrainian people—and as a reminder, for those of us watching from a distance, of what is actually at stake.

This PDF edition is a first release of *Stop Stealing the Future* following its serialization on Substack. It will be published in print and ebook versions as part of the second edition of *My Fabulous Fascist Summer Vacation* in the coming weeks.

Scan below or visit the Substack series link for photographs, video clips, interview recordings, and ongoing updates from Ukraine:

briangruber.substack.com/s/chronicles-of-the-ukrainian-resistance

Brian Gruber
June 1, 2026
Bangkok, Thailand

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Day 1: Warsaw

It was a magic moment—an essential distillation of the moral and intellectual collapse of the United States.

For anyone who had watched the years-long Trump apostasy, it was no surprise, though breathtaking in its vulgarity and corruption.

We could have seen it coming when Paul Manafort—Russian oligarchic operative, authoritarian grifter, and Trump campaign manager—requested only one change in the 2016 Republican Party platform: the removal of the phrase “providing lethal defensive weapons to Ukraine.”

We could have seen it coming when the Republican-led Senate Intelligence Committee confirmed that Russian interference in the 2016 election was real, extensive, and “coherent and well-constructed,” and that there were “concerning” contacts between the Trump campaign and Russian actors. Or when Trump was impeached for trying to pressure Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky into fabricating a Biden family scandal.

Still, when it came, it was staggering political theater.

The Propaganda Tour

On February 28, 2025, U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance publicly humiliated the visiting President Zelensky in the Oval Office, dismissing his invitation to witness the devastation wrought by the Russian invasion as a propaganda tour. The fix was in. Donald Trump had been compromised for decades by the billions in Russian money laundered through his real-estate and casino empire.

In that moment, America declared a new alignment. My country—with its split personality of enslaver and liberator, exploiter and humanitarian, warmonger and liberal democratic beacon—revealed which face would define its future. Vance’s sneer was both cruelty and confession.

So I decided to embark on my own propaganda tour—to see how Ukrainians live, love, work, create, and resist during the first major ground invasion on the European continent since World War II. Overland through Lviv, Kyiv, and Poltava, then on to Kharkiv at the Russian border, down through Dnipro, terminating in Odesa, on the Black Sea.

Departure

August 4, 2025: my seventieth birthday. After a daylong celebration punctuated by two birthday cakes and fond farewells, I left Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport to begin a new decade and a new journey. My intention was straightforward: to gather and amplify Ukrainian voices of resistance.

After the long Emirates flight, with a brief stop in Abu Dhabi, I arrived in Warsaw's Frederic Chopin Airport at dawn. Two friends from my Koh Phangan island home helped lay the groundwork for the trip: Max, a Ukrainian, arranged train and bus passages; Konrad, a Polish entrepreneur, offered his city flat and, later, his car to drive me across the border into Lviv.

When I arrived at his home, I found a gong beside the bed, which he gleefully demonstrated—a wake-up call in bronze. After a home-cooked meal and a nap, Konrad and I headed out for a walk along the Vistula River.

The River

The Vistula is Poland's spine, running from the Carpathian Mountains through Kraków and Warsaw to the Baltic Sea. Surrounded by picnicking families and strolling couples, Konrad pointed toward the far embankment, where a darker history lingers.

Nazi Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, triggering World War II. Two weeks later, the Soviet Army invaded from the east, fulfilling the secret terms of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact—the cynical alliance between Hitler and Stalin.

Five years later, in August 1944, the Polish Home Army launched the Warsaw Uprising to liberate the city. The Soviet Army, at war with Germany since 1941, already on the opposite bank of the Vistula, did not cross to help. Soviet artillery sat silent as Nazi forces crushed the uprising, slaughtering tens of thousands of civilians. Allied planes were blocked from using Soviet airfields for resupply.

When the Germans finally withdrew, the city lay in ruins. Stalin's troops entered only then, ensuring that when Warsaw rose again, it would do so under a government of his choosing.

Domination and Aggression

We talk about fascism and communism, about capitalism and democracy; we use these words to describe the kind of world we want to live in, or the kind we choose to resist.

On my overland train jaunt through Europe last year for *My Fabulous Fascist Summer Vacation*, I watched Raoul Peck's stunning HBO adaptation of my favorite political travel book, Sven Lindqvist's *Exterminate All the Brutes*. The book and the series explore the connection between colonialism, powered by the racist dehumanization and subjugation of the "other," and fascism, powered by the scapegoating and dehumanization of ethnic minorities and political opponents.

Peck—and Lindqvist—consider the history of colonialism and fascism as the lust for domination and aggression. People hoarding wealth and power wanting to hoard more wealth and power at the expense of the vulnerable and powerless.

The genocide of Native Americans. Slavery. The Nazi genocide of Jews, a few short decades after the German genocide of Namibians. Mussolini's fascist persecution of political enemies while genociding Libyans. Franco's launch of his fascist attack on the Spanish Republic from his colonial outpost in North Africa.

What stands out in Donald Trump's fascistic insistence on harming protestors, imprisoning political enemies, constructing concentration camps for immigrants, and threatening military interventions in Canada, Greenland, Panama, Venezuela, and several American cities is the utter lack of decency in his private and public lives. Beyond the money laundering and election intervention, Trump's repeated expressions of admiration for Vladimir Putin represent a shared creed of aggression, domination, and avarice.

In the Ecstatic Search for Decency

Before traveling to Kyiv in 2019 for *Surmountable*, I interviewed Columbia University journalism professor Todd Gitlin. I asked him what he would tell a young activist hoping for a better world; he climbed a ladder to a shelf high on the wall behind me to pull down a copy of his *Letters to a Young Activist*. I didn't read the inscription until I paused for a late lunch at a Korean food truck on Broadway, outside the university.

The inscription read, “In the ecstatic search for decency.”

This journey is that search, an exploration of the courage and insistence of Ukrainian men and women to resist domination and aggression, at any cost.

Day 2: Warsaw

City of Ghosts and Guardians

Memories of repression, resistance, and rebirth

“If we don’t help Ukrainians, we will be next.”—Mona, Warsaw guide

My one full day in Poland’s capital coincides with the swearing-in of the new right-leaning president, Karol Nawrocki. I meet Bob and Ewa Block at the historic, Vienna-esque Café Bristol, smack in the middle of a parade of red and white flags carried by insistent supporters. Bob, an old cable-TV colleague, has arranged a walking tour with the superb Mona Bębnowska. The focus will be resistance during World War II—the Ghetto Uprising, the Warsaw Uprising—and the decades of Soviet rule that followed.

Mona’s city holds ghosts from its Nazi and Red Army occupations, and she is ready to introduce us to both.

“Warsaw looks young because everything old was burned.”

After an illuminating walk through the city center, Mona brings us to the edge of what was once the Jewish ghetto, where modern apartments sit beside worn fragments of brick. One jagged section stands out—darker, uneven, abruptly ending where the past was severed. This, she tells us, is one of the few surviving pieces of the original ghetto wall.

More than 400,000 Jews were imprisoned behind it. They lived on starvation rations in overcrowded rooms where disease spread quickly.

“The ghetto was not a neighborhood,” Mona says. “It was a sentence.”

Children were often the only ones small enough to slip through cracks or climb over lower sections. Many smuggled food, messages, or medicine. Several were caught and executed. A discreet plaque lists the names of child couriers—some only ten years old.

“They understood the danger,” Mona says. “They understood the lie they were living inside.”

The 1943 Ghetto Uprising

We approach the Ghetto Uprising Monument, a massive bronze composition honoring the 1943 fighters. A few hundred poorly armed Jews resisted the liquidation of the ghetto, fighting from bunkers, apartments, and sewers. They knew they could not win. Their goal was simply not to vanish without resistance.

Nearby, groups of schoolchildren listen as teachers read eyewitness accounts—voices of hunger, fear, and defiance. The atmosphere is not theatrical; this is a city that carries memory as part of its architecture.

The 1944 Warsaw Uprising

Uprising resistance took place through a network of underground passages

From here we walk toward the monument commemorating the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, a separate and much larger revolt launched by the Polish underground.

Its goal: liberate Warsaw before the Soviet Red Army arrived.

For 63 days, they fought street-to-street. When the uprising collapsed, German forces carried out the systematic destruction of Warsaw. Approximately 85 percent of the city was erased.

“It was intentional,” Mona says. “Not battle damage. A policy to erase a capital.”

Rebuilding a City from Ashes

After the war, leaders debated abandoning Warsaw entirely. Some proposed making Kraków the capital and preserving Warsaw as a ruin.

But Stalin insisted that Warsaw be rebuilt as the capital of a Soviet-aligned state.

The Old Town reconstruction became a remarkable historical project. Architects relied on prewar photographs and the detailed paintings of Bernardo Bellotto (Canaletto), whose canvases became architectural blueprints.

One architect, Jan Zachwatowicz, saved key buildings through subterfuge—organizing workers to rebuild ground floors overnight so that officials could not demolish them the next morning. Enough fragments survived to allow restoration.

“Warsaw looks old because it is new,” Mona says.

Outside the Old Town, postwar socialist planning dominates: wide boulevards, monumental buildings, and uniform housing blocks. In the former ghetto district, too little remained to restore. Planners had to redraw the map from scratch.

History Informs Poland’s Stance Toward Ukraine

As we walk, Mona explains the geopolitical memory that shapes Poland’s relationship with Russia.

In 1939, Germany invaded from the west; seventeen days later, the Soviet Union invaded from the east, acting under the secret protocols of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. Poland was divided.

In 1940, the Soviet NKVD executed more than 20,000 Polish officers, scholars, doctors, clergy, and reserve leaders in the Katyn Massacre. For fifty years, Soviet authorities blamed the Nazis. Telling the truth was illegal.

“For half a century,” Mona says, “a lie was placed in our history books.”

This history shapes Poland’s support for Ukraine today.

“When Russia denies atrocities in Ukraine or claims Ukraine is not a real country,” she says, “we recognize the pattern. It is familiar. Only the tools have changed.”

We do not visit the central station, but Mona recounts volunteering there in the first weeks of Russia’s 2022 invasion. Nearly one million refugees passed through. Poles brought food, strollers, blankets, medicine. Families opened spare rooms. Public transportation became free.

“People knew what had to be done,” she says. “No one needed to tell them.”

Across political divides, support for Ukraine remains broad. “If Ukraine falls,” she says, “we are the new front line.”

A jet passes overhead. “F-16,” she notes. Poland flies them now; Ukraine soon will. For many Poles, the logic is simple: strengthen Ukraine so the war does not reach NATO’s borders.

“When Ukrainians ask for help,” Mona says, “we understand what it means.”

As the tour ends, I thank her for an extraordinary, unforgettable day. After dinner with Bob and Ewa, Konrad and I review the logistics for crossing into Ukraine and agree to leave early the next morning for Lviv—eastward, toward a country at war.

Day 3: Lviv

The Moral Geography of Freedom

Crossing from the Polish countryside into Lviv

It’s through a mosaic of diverse, intense voices that patterns emerge.

Konrad and I launch our Warsaw-Lviv road trip early and well-provisioned. I am just getting over the physical effects of my 20-hour trip from Bangkok.

At the historic Dwór Kopina estate east of the city, we visit with lawyer and publisher Henryk Grocholski—to discuss Poland’s moral and historical bonds with Ukraine. Ph.D. graduate of the University of Warsaw’s Faculty of Law and Administration, licensed detective, and board member of the Foundation of the Cavaliers of Malta and the Cantores Minores choral association, Grocholski has been decorated with Poland’s Brown Cross of Merit and the Order for Cultural Merits.

Over tea in the garden, within earshot of the play of his three young daughters, Grocholski reflected on centuries of Russian domination, the rebirth of Polish democracy, and why Ukraine’s survival today is essential for Europe’s future. He spoke of freedom not as an abstract principle but as something intimate—a shared inheritance that must be defended again and again.

Henryk Grocholski: It’s in Poland’s national interest and national safety to have a strong, independent, pro-European Ukraine on our eastern border. Despite the dark pages of our shared history, the possibilities for cooperation between Poland and Ukraine are far greater than those between Poland and Russia.

Ukrainians understand what freedom means. They are ready to fight for it, as we once were. Russians, in contrast, have been taught to equate power with fear—even fear of their own leaders. That’s the moral divide between our worlds.

Brian Gruber: What do you say to those abroad who dismiss Ukraine’s struggle as Western manipulation?

Henryk: If you don’t understand the situation, don’t judge it from a distance. Go to Lviv, Kyiv, or Odesa and talk to people. When Ukraine stood

up in the Euromaidan revolution, they weren't fighting only for themselves—they were fighting for all of us.

Brian: Why was NATO membership important for Poland?

Henryk: Joining NATO wasn't about provocation. It was about protection. After the war, we wanted to make sure no one could dominate us again. NATO made us part of a family of free nations. Russia's logic is imperial—it believes it owns its neighbors. NATO, for all its flaws, has never invaded a country to take its land.

Supporting Ukraine and Ukrainians Post-Invasion

Brian: How did you and your organization help when the full-scale invasion began?

Henryk: Like many Poles, we opened our homes and wallets. My family hosted a Ukrainian family in Warsaw for ten months. Through the Knights of Malta, we provided medical aid, converted office spaces into small apartments for refugees, and published books on Polish-Ukrainian history, giving all proceeds to our Ukrainian partners.

We must also protect Ukrainian culture. A nation survives not just through soldiers but through its language, art, and memory.

Brian: Some argue for a ceasefire, no matter the cost.

Henryk: If the world forces Ukraine to stop now, Russia will only pause before starting again. This has happened many times before. Anyone who doubts it should read history—or visit Ukraine and see for themselves.

Brian: What would an ideal end look like?

Henryk: Ideally, Russia would withdraw, return Crimea, and pay reparations. But they never have—to anyone. Perhaps there could be an international demarcation line like in Korea. But ultimately, it's not for outsiders to decide. Only Ukrainians can choose how this ends. Our duty is to support them in every possible way.

Brian: Why is supporting Ukraine so important to you as a Pole?

Henryk: Helping Ukraine is helping Poland. If Ukraine falls, it affects us all. It's the largest country between Poland and imperial Russia—its independence is essential to the safety of Europe.

Polish and Russian Values

Brian: In short, how would you describe Poland's history with Russia?

Henryk: For centuries Russia tried to erase us—banning our language, deporting our citizens, executing those who resisted. Then, in 1939, they invaded alongside Nazi Germany. After the war we were "liberated" into Soviet occupation until 1989. Only then could we begin building a modern, independent country again.

Brian: How do Polish and Russian values differ?

Henryk: Poles value personal freedom and moral responsibility. Many Russians seek a strong ruler to tell them what to do. They equate fear with respect. Our Christianity teaches that people are free and accountable for their choices. Theirs often celebrates obedience to power.

Brian: What would you say to Americans deciding whether to support Ukraine?

Henryk: Read history, not propaganda. Speak to Ukrainians. Visit their towns and see their courage. Freedom and democracy are never guaranteed —we have to fight for them, and we have to help one another.

Public Media Exec Mariya Frey Dreams of Real Journalism

First night in Lviv with a table of well-watered journalists

Konrad and I roll into Lviv late for my first interview after a 13-hour jaunt through the Polish and Ukrainian countrysides and a surprisingly brisk border crossing. As he drops me off in Friday night traffic for a mad dash to the meeting spot, Mariya Frey texts that she and a group of her journo colleagues have moved to the popular Beer Station pub. Moistened by the Lviv sun and the long road trip, I jog several blocks through the city center, spare shirt in hand, to a rollicking scene of Frey celebrating the week with her reporter comrades. I am planted at the head of a table featuring beer steins as big as my head and large plates of red-tinted sausages that threaten cardiac arrest. It's my loud, warm welcome to Ukraine.

Ukrainians can teach Americans - and the world - a thing or two about resistance. I asked Mariya's boisterous journos what they might like to say to Americans. One answered, hoisting his young daughter to his shoulder, we can teach you something about the value of freedom. Another suggested, you don't value freedom if you have never had to fight for it, as Ukrainians have, for decades. A common sentiment: I will never let my children live under a repressive political system. There was a consistent tone from these collegial, hospitable professionals and parents, passionate, indignant, and confident.

And a consistent message, that Ukraine is on the front lines in the fight against authoritarianism. Resist or be dominated.

Konrad has parked and joined the Beer Station fracas. He's been a generous, fun travel companion. As we get our drink and food orders sorted, a fierce scene breaks out on the other side of the pub. An elderly Ukrainian woman, somewhat influenced by alcohol, tears into the neighboring table upon hearing the Russian language spoken. The scene is fraught with emotion and tension. My new journo friends interpret and explain the political context of the confrontation. It is an issue that will recur through many interviews: the century-long attempt by Russian dictators—from Lenin to Stalin to Putin—to suppress Ukrainian language and culture, and the national response during a time of aggression and resistance. Mariya tells me she has to get to her family, so I hook her up with a Bluetooth lavalier mic and ask her to tell me what she does.

Mariya Frey: First of all, I'm the leader of a group of remarkable people working in media. And I'm also a mother of two girls. Those roles are connected—I can't talk about myself without mentioning both.

I started as a local reporter in Mariupol in 2014, when the first occupation began. I spent that time under occupation. Later I moved to Kyiv and joined the team creating Ukraine's first true public broadcaster. Before 2017, Ukraine had nothing like it.

From then on, I worked as a manager with regional media across the country, visiting every outlet. I became General Producer, and now I'm on the management board—the only woman there. That's why I also handle issues of discrimination, gender politics, and gender rights.

Brian: In Ukraine, what does "public media" mean? In the U.S., it has a very specific meaning—though it's being gutted there.

Mariya: For Ukrainians, public media means a voice they can trust. It's independent of political influence. We now enjoy 80% trust levels, reaching 30% of the population weekly.

Before 2017, the old government broadcaster was corrupt, under-resourced, and outdated. We had to rebuild from scratch, not only for TV but for radio, websites, and social platforms—serving both national and local communities.

Brian: How are you funded?

Mariya: By law, we can claim 0.2% of national income each year. But during wartime, the budget is tight, and although the law protects us, Parliament and government decisions still affect what we actually receive.

Brian: What do you love about the work?

Mariya: In 2017, creating independent media in Ukraine seemed impossible. As a Mariupol reporter, I dreamed of real journalism, of teachers who could show us how. Now we have it, in every region. We've created courses, trained people, and built a culture of true journalism. It's not just work—it's our dream and our soul.

Brian: And you're a mom—two daughters?

Mariya: Yes. My older one is 16. She just returned from the U.S. on the FLEX program, where she spent 10 months. It changed her life.

Funny enough, my first training program at the public broadcaster was also in the U.S. I came back telling her, "Imagine a country without Soviet buildings, without communism." From then, she dreamed of going.

Disinformation and Capitulation

Brian: Why is Russia so effective at disinformation?

Mariya: Because lying is a way of life. When we talk now, I tell you my truth. Russians communicate in lies as naturally as we breathe. They live in alternate realities. It's not just online—it's in cultural centers, Russian studies programs, everywhere.

People ask me, “Why do you think Russians are bad?” My answer: I can’t go home. I don’t have a home anymore. That’s a fact.

Brian: Some say Ukraine could have capitulated long ago. Why resist at such great cost?

Mariya: Because survival depends on it. If we surrender, Ukraine disappears for 50 years, like North Korea under occupation.

Personally, I was a Russian speaker. It was my native language, and essential for reporting. But in 2016, I decided to switch to Ukrainian. I announced it publicly—and immediately received death threats. Russians even took my Facebook posts and spread them on hostile sites.

When I spoke Russian, I was safe. When I spoke Ukrainian, I was in danger. That difference shows everything.

Brian: Across three Russian regimes—Tsarist, Soviet, and Putin—what’s been consistent?

Mariya: Fear. And hatred of people who are not like them.

Brian: How do Ukrainians feel about shifts in American policy this year?

Mariya: I remember the headline we ran when Trump was elected: “Trump elected for the second time, and for the last time.” It captured our mix of realism and optimism.

A journalist across the table adds: “It’s unpredictable, chaotic, vulgar. Honestly, bullshit. Half a year wasted. Flying to Moscow won’t change anything.”

Another interjects, showing me scenes of destruction on his phone: “I can’t be polite—it’s fucking embarrassing. My home in Kyiv was just bombed. We depend on U.S. air defense, and politics like this feel shameful.”

Brian: Disinformation is global. With AI, it’s only getting worse. Are we doomed?

Mariya: No. Think of it like driving. Cars are dangerous, so we require driver’s licenses. Now, with just a phone, you can kill someone with disinformation.

We need media literacy training like physical exercise: short, constant, built into daily life. Imagine an app that gives everyone weekly info-literacy tests, strengthening their “muscle” against lies. Tech companies only care about money, but political will can force change.

Brian: How did Ukrainians view the American electorate choosing Trump for a second term?

Mariya: With disbelief. We don’t want to repeat that mistake. We’ve made our own—once we elected a comedian, Zelensky, though in our case he became a wartime leader.

Laughter and side comments: comparisons to Jimmy Kimmel as president, jokes about Biden’s age, frustration at U.S. politics.

Brian: So what’s the recipe against fascism and disinformation?

Mariya: Connection. Ukraine resists because of invisible horizontal bonds. In Soviet times, religion wasn’t just belief, it was survival. Connections tell us who is friend and who is enemy. Without them, resistance fails.

Another voice from across the table: “Be the change. Take responsibility. Don’t wait for someone else. If everyone does their part, together we can resist.”

Brian: You’ve lived through the Orange Revolution, Euromaidan, and now full-scale invasion. Even your children hold protest signs. That’s extraordinary.

Mariya: Yes. It’s part of our lives now. Resistance is tradition. My daughters understand it, and they join us. That’s Ukraine.

Konrad and I stumble out of the Beer Station some hours later in search of his parked car and our rented flat.

Welcome to Ukraine.

Day 3: Lviv

“We fight with guitars as well as rifles”

Music, trauma surgery, and resistance in wartime Lviv

Lviv is an absolutely fabulous European city.

On the way to my interview with Andriy, I tried to place why Lviv felt so familiar: the culinary similarity to my grandma Yetta’s Eastern European dishes; perhaps the architectural landscapes recalling last year’s visits to Budapest and Vienna. Andriy Zholob would share his own comparisons.

I am seeking a rhythm for these conversations, focusing on key issues, asking some repetitive questions to discern patterns, asking others to draw out personal stories. The questions give way to human sparks—intimate moments of discovery that are a privilege to witness.

Andriy, tattooed, bearded, and exuberant, welcomes me to his office.

Andriy Zholob: I’m 44—a husband, father, punk rock musician with the band Beton here in Lviv, and a veteran of the 46th Airmobile Brigade. I commanded a large medical unit as a military surgeon. Before the war, I was also a radio DJ and hosted big events like the UEFA finals and Champions League. Funny thing is, I once thought the military was stupid—definitely not for me.

Brian Gruber: You were a punk—military and punk don’t usually go together.

Andriy: (*laughs*) Exactly! I used to say, “Punk in the army? Never.” But when the invasion happened, I couldn’t just be a musician singing about problems without trying to solve them. We had an enemy, and if we wanted freedom, we had to fight—for our land, but also for our minds.

Brian: Were you able to keep making music during the war?

Andriy: At first, no. The first month of full-scale war, I couldn’t even pick up a guitar. Something broke inside me. But then a friend connected us with The Clash. They gave us permission to adapt *London Calling* into *Kyiv Calling*. That song became a weapon—we used it to raise money for our brigade. Suddenly, our little band from Lviv was in *Rolling Stone*. Out of

war came this trampoline for our music. Since leaving the army, we've recorded our fourth album, *Unity*, with other servicemen and volunteers. It's all about solidarity.

Brian: You've been part of every protest and revolution since the early days of the Maidan. What's the common thread?

Andriy: Ukrainians are like springs—every time someone pushes us down, we bounce back stronger. Governments with pro-Russian forces kept testing us, and we kept proving we won't break. Resistance is in our DNA.

Brian: Some say this is just a proxy war. That you're being manipulated.

Andriy: People who only see this war through foreign media can believe that. But when you live it, you know it's not proxy—it's survival. I wish more Ukrainians spoke English to explain it better. But like Croatians in the 1990s, we share the same truth: defending your land is not propaganda, it's life.

Brian: What does Russia want?

Andriy: They want Ukraine—our land, our culture. It's what empires do: erase cultures, divide and rule. They tried it with Siberian tribes, they tried it with us—filling our music charts with Russian songs, drowning us in vodka. Culture is a powerful weapon. That's why we fight with guitars as well as rifles.

Brian: Last night I saw an elderly woman screaming in a restaurant because people at the next table were speaking Russian. Why does that language provoke such pain?

Andriy: For many of us, Russian is like a knife—it cuts. Years ago, we tolerated it. Now, after so much bloodshed, we won't. My wife is like that woman. While I was at the front, she carried the burden alone—angry, wounded, but strong. Trauma speaks through language.

Brian: You were a surgeon for 20 years in civilian life. What was your medical work like during the war?

Andriy: In the field, I cut what couldn't be saved and stitched what could. First on the front lines, then at stabilization points. It was intense—but I'm alive, with all my limbs. Of course, I have PTSD, but I won't hide that.

Culture is a powerful weapon. That's why we fight with guitars as well as rifles.

Brian: You seem remarkably grounded. How do you keep your mental health intact?

Andriy: Family and punk rock. Music gets the demons out. My Harley, the mountains, time with my kids—all helped. I also worked with a psychotherapist who gave me tools to manage. Because of daily video calls with my wife and kids, I wasn't torn from real life. When I came home, it felt like I'd been gone two weeks, not two years.

Brian: How did the war change your family life?

Andriy: My wife had to become everything—mother, father, doctor, driver. I came home and thought: where is my queen? Step by step, I tried to give her space to be a woman again, not a fighter. I'm more responsible now—but also more flammable. On my motorcycle, if someone cuts me off, I see red. I have to stop myself.

Brian: If you were head of Lviv's tourism bureau, how would you describe your city?

Andriy: Lviv is old Europe in miniature. Our center survived WWII and still holds the atmosphere of Vienna, Krakow, Paris. It's like a living museum—but a family museum. Beautiful, vibrant, full of history.

Brian: Let's lighten it up. Give me your essential punk rock playlist.

Andriy: (*grins*) Bad Religion's *American Jesus*. The Clash's *London Calling*. Songs by Pennywise and Lagwagon. Hardcore bands like Biohazard, Sick of It All, and crossover bands like Anthrax. And yes, old Offspring—*Gotta Get Away* never leaves me. That music keeps me young.

Brian: What do you want Americans to know?

Andriy: First, thank you. I've met amazing U.S. veterans and NGOs who've shown us how America honors its soldiers. I'm applying that here in Lviv as head of our veterans' office. But more importantly: Ukraine is not giving up. Donbas and Luhansk are Ukrainian. Russia's occupation started a century ago with famine and resettlement. We're still resisting. Even in war, we smile, love our families, and play punk rock.

Mariana and Vladyslav Go for Gold

Last night, the sports journalists from public broadcaster Suspilne invited me to the Ukrainian National Track and Field Championships. After checking in with the video production team, I watched several events. National track star Mariana Shastak ran the 400 relay, a specialty of my daughter Andrea in her regional and national high school competitions back in the U.S. I talked with Mariana alongside the track about what it means to compete as a young champion in the midst of war.

Mariana Shastak: I started racing in Ukraine 10 years ago; since around 2015, I started competing internationally. I had my first world championship in 2016. And then I started my studying in the U.S., and practicing there since 2022.

Brian: You have a great American accent. Is it different competing and mentally preparing for what you do during wartime? Does that affect your performance?

Mariana: Definitely, yes. I want to say that I went to the U.S. one month before the war started, and I'd never heard sirens. When I got home for the first time, it was during the summer time, it was in-season time, I was very stressed because I didn't understand how our athletes can prepare and compete in this condition. Sirens all the time. They have to hide, they have to go to shelter. You have to interrupt yourself from practice sessions, and it's very hard. And just this year, when we went through, they launched rockets and drones during the national championship. We had to hide at 2, 3, 4 a.m., and then the next morning we had to compete. It was really very hard mentally and physically.

Brian: Is there anything you'd want to say to Americans so that they can better understand what's happening in your country?

Mariana: I really see the support from Americans to Ukrainians. I feel it when I'm there and when I'm here. I truly understand when people don't really understand what we go through because they are not here, but I see the support and I'm really thankful for that. It's just, you can't really comprehend it until you are here and you go through it. You have to experience that, otherwise all you can do is just say, sorry.

They launched rockets and drones during the national championship. We had to hide at 2, 3, 4 a.m., then the next morning, we had to compete. It was really very hard mentally and physically.

Brian: You just now ran in the preliminaries. How did you do?

Mariana: I did good. I'm first so far, and hopefully that's how I'm gonna end up tomorrow.

The next day, Mariana Shostak won the 400m and 4x400m relay.

The reporters next hooked me up with Vladyslav Malykhin, one of the country's leading pole vaulters.

Vladyslav Malykhin: We have a lot of strong athletes in pole vault—it's one of the most beautiful and well-developed sports in Ukraine, thanks to Sergey Bubka, the former world and Olympic champion record holder.

Before the war, sport in Ukraine was amazing. We always had opportunities for training camps and new tracks. But now, so many great places—like recovery centers or stadiums such as Bakhmut—are destroyed. The Russians, these terrorists, just bombed them, and now we have nothing.

It's also hard because we can't stay in one place for long. Nowhere is safe in Ukraine, and it gets worse every day. Our military is brave, but compared to Russia we don't have the numbers, so more and more people are called up. And it doesn't matter if you're an athlete, an ordinary man, or homeless—they just take you. It's terrible, because many of my friends, really good athletes, have died defending Ukraine. Pole vaulters, decathletes. I could talk about this a long time, but it's very hard. They were such good people.

Still, we stay strong. We try to do our best and keep developing championships. I see improvements at this track event every year. I'm grateful I can come back from America and compete for Ukraine in world championships, European championships, and other competitions. I love Ukraine. My family is here. My whole life is here. But I chose sport, and for me to reach my personal best, America gives more opportunities. Still, every summer I come back and compete for Ukraine.

Brian: You represent Ukraine. Is there a unique challenge in competing and preparing mentally for your sport in a time of war?

Vladyslav: That's a good question. Look—in Ukraine we only have competitions at this level. You can see, it's not huge like the World Championships or European Championships. Before the war, it was easy to travel to international competitions. We had many opportunities to compete at a higher level. Now we're closed in Ukraine, with just one or two chances to qualify.

That's very difficult, because when you finally qualify, you're not fully prepared. You get to the World Championships, and you miss out because you're nervous and not used to that level of competition. Before the war, we had many events to build experience. Now we don't. That's really bad for athletes.

Brian: You spent time in the United States. Is there anything you'd like to say to Americans to help them better understand what you and other Ukrainians are experiencing here?

Vladyslav: Yes. Just today my mom called me. She told me that last night in my city, the Russians bombed the swimming pool complex and the track where kids train and develop their sport. Thankfully no one was killed, but everything was destroyed. That was a big area for sports, for kids. Now the children have nothing.

This is not a normal life. People don't live here with fun or parties. You don't have many opportunities to do sport. Maybe in Lviv there's more, but in other cities there's nothing. No cinemas, no facilities—only bars. And every time you hear the air raid siren, everyone has to run to shelter. You're always nervous for your parents, for your family. You never feel safe. That's life here.

Art Which Saves

David takes me to the Territory of Terror

I arrived at the Friday afternoon art class a few minutes before three. Children were dropped off by their adult escorts, gathering around tables with familiar faces—some already hunched over paper and art supplies, brushes wagging in small fists. There was a gentle buzz of movement: coats being peeled off, pencils and brushes rolling, an older woman kneeling beside a boy who appeared paralyzed by indecision.

There were children from Mariupol, Melitopol, Kherson—cities now synonymous with bombed-out neighborhoods and mass graves.

This was the weekly ritual of Art Which Saves, a volunteer-run program created by art teacher Nataliia Pavliuk and her daughter, Yustyna, in the first days of the invasion. “We understood we could not sit at home,” Yustyna told me. “We asked what we could do well. The answer was: help the children express what they were feeling.”

Their first visits were to hospitals, then orphanages, then informal shelters. Children arrived from the east and south by the busload—dazed, silent, clinging to strangers. Some couldn’t speak. Some couldn’t use the toilet alone. Many could barely be coaxed to lift a brush.

I was introduced to today’s event by David Elley, who learned of my journey through Substack. We met for coffee, then wandered over together for the session. David and Yustyna urged me to paint alongside the children. I demurred—insisting I have no talent—but they persisted, and I eventually produced a psychedelic stick figure of a friend. The sweetness of the room was infectious.

David is an active supporter of the Ukrainian resistance, one of many expats I would meet in my travels. He volunteers in a kitchen preparing dried meals for soldiers and co-runs the Sunflower Dreams Project, which brings children’s art abroad to raise funds and awareness.

He also told me about NAFO—the online community of volunteers who counter Russian propaganda with memes and cartoon dog avatars. “We’re just regular people,” he said. “Meanwhile, Russia spends enormous resources on disinformation. Most governments still do not grasp that propaganda is now fully weaponized.”

(Most of the questions in this interview were directed to Nataliia Pavliuk, who answered in Ukrainian. Her daughter, Yustyna, translated and often expanded on her mother’s replies in English. We spoke during the art session and later at a nearby outdoor café, joined by David. What appears here reflects the blended voice they offered together.)

The Work of Healing

“A family from Kharkiv spent three weeks in a shelter,” Yustyna said. “The children were so terrified they would not let go of their mother’s hand. She

couldn’t even go to the bathroom without them. When we drew with them, they relaxed—just a little. But we saw the change.”

The program grew quickly. Volunteers offered space; parents begged for more sessions. Children came from the edges of Lviv, where entire uprooted communities—Mariupol families, Melitopol families—clustered together in apartment blocks to preserve some sense of identity.

“Some kids say, ‘I don’t know how to draw,’” Yustyna said. “We tell them: ‘You can try. We’re here to help you.’ After a while they begin believing in themselves. They draw dreams, houses, stories, their missing fathers.”

One boy refused to use his hands—some deeper psychological wound had closed that door—so they encouraged him to paint with his feet. “There are no limits,” she said. “You can draw with whatever part of your body still feels safe.”

Some children, especially those whose fathers had been killed, painted only in black during their first few sessions. “Then, step by step, color returns,” she said. “Not quickly. But it comes. We see them recovering a little.”

None of this is funded by the state. It’s volunteers. Paint. Paper. Brushes. And the quiet determination of a mother and daughter who refuse to let Ukrainian childhood be defined solely by war.

“Worse and Worser”

I asked how Americans should understand the conflict in Ukraine.

“It is not a conflict,” Yustyna said sharply. “It is a war, and it kills. Many people died here. Sometimes people think, ‘I am one person, what can I do?’ But everything helps. Everything.”

I asked about the political and emotional atmosphere more than three years into the full-scale invasion. The exhaustion in her expression softened; she seemed to search for the right words.

“There are no good choices,” she finally said. “Only worse and worser.”

Everyone in Ukraine has lost someone—a friend, a relative, a colleague. “When you work every day with children who lost parents, it becomes your own life,” she said. “Here in Lviv, even when we hear drones, we joke: ‘If

they hit me today, what clothes will I be found in?' It sounds like a joke, but it is real."

Yet when the conversation turns to surrender, her exhaustion evaporates.

"Soldiers are clear: we cannot give away territory," she said. "We know Russians too well. They never stop. If we give them something, they come back for more. Maybe next will be Georgia again. Maybe Alaska. They still think Alaska is theirs. You cannot make deals with people like this."

I asked about Ukrainian perceptions of President Zelensky.

"He does good work internationally," she said. "Inside Ukraine, not everyone on his team does good work. But that is normal. And we cannot change the president now—it would not be legal. People protest laws or decisions, yes. But that is democracy. Not revolution."

The narrative that Ukrainians are "turning against Zelensky," she said, is mostly foreign media misunderstanding the rhythm of Ukrainian public life. "We are tired," she said. "But there is no strong movement to replace him. And no obvious person better than him now."

The real fear is not Zelensky. It is abandonment.

"The question is how we survive if the world stops helping," she said. "How we raise children, build families, plan futures. That is what people worry about."

Identity, Propaganda, and the Long War

We spoke about language—how Russian speakers from the Donbas or the occupied south experience this moment. "Some have lost all affection for Russia," she said. "Others have not. But you must know our history."

She described how, after earlier attempts at Ukrainian independence, the Soviet regime deported millions and replaced them with military families from Russia. "They mixed populations to weaken Ukrainian identity," she said. "People were told to leave their apartments so Soviet officers could live there."

In western Ukraine, people preserved the language more fiercely. "We fought for it," she said. "But Russian propaganda is still strong. They tell

people, ‘Ukrainians force you to speak Ukrainian.’ And some people believe it. They play by Russia’s rules without knowing.”

She pointed to Ukrainian culture constantly being appropriated—embroidered Carpathian patterns sold online as “original Russian clothing,” Ukrainian writers and artists claimed as Russian. “Russia steals everything,” she said. “Land, history, identity.”

She paused, then added softly:

“You must be educated to see the truth.”

The Cost of Survival

The trauma is constant. “My mother cannot sleep alone now,” she said. A close family friend—father, husband, anchor—died in a drone strike last year. “Since then, she is afraid of the apartment at night.”

For Yustyna, PTSD emerges more sharply abroad. “In Rome, I booked an apartment far from the Vatican because I thought it could be bombed,” she said. “It makes no sense. But your mind stays in the war even when your body leaves.”

Everywhere in Ukraine, funerals move through the streets daily. “You pray the people you know will survive today,” she said. “You don’t think long-term.”

Her voice brightened as she described her country’s resilience. “We always fought for independence,” she said. “Eight hundred years—Cossacks, revolutions. Russia tries again and again to take our history, our life. But we don’t want them. And we always resist.”

I told her that Americans often misunderstand Ukraine—that many imagine a poor post-Soviet backwater. She laughed. “A client once told me he expected children begging and no education. Then he arrived and saw a European country. We have schools everywhere. We have a high-quality life. Maybe we have a marketing problem.”

Kids’ Art at the Territory of Terror

Later, David brought me to the Territory of Terror museum, built on the site of Lviv’s wartime ghetto and its postwar Soviet transit prison. It is a heavy

place even before you step inside—an industrial gate, a bleak yard, the sense that history hasn't faded so much as crouched in the corners of the buildings.

We entered the gallery where the children's paintings hung. The exhibition commemorated the Olenivka massacre, when more than fifty Ukrainian POWs were killed in a Russian strike on July 28, 2022. One survivor of both Azovstal and Olenivka, Oleksandr Chandra, spent three days in the prison and more than two years in captivity. His son paints regularly with Nataliia and Yustyna.

David pointed to a winter scene painted by a fourteen-year-old girl. A small angel stood in the snow, face crushed by exhaustion. "At Christmas, there should be joy," David said. "This angel can only weep."

Another painting memorialized the drone strike of September 4, 2023, here in Lviv—when three daughters and their mother, close friends of Nataliia's family, were killed. Only the father survived. The artwork showed a shattered window and, in the distance, a bird guarding eggs in the rubble—fragile hope amid destruction.

We moved from piece to piece. A twelve-year-old boy's painting of a former resort near Odesa, now ringed by landmines. A child's depiction of the Mariupol theater bombed in March 2022, even though the word "children" had been painted outside in giant white letters.

Finally, we stopped at a painting not by a child but by a mother. Beneath it she listed every town her family had fled—each name a reminder of displacement and loss. At the bottom she had written:

"My home is where my children are."

Day 5: Lviv

Come Back Alive

“I accepted that the struggle for a safe Ukraine may last my whole life.”

Zoya Krasovska is a Ukrainian journalist, researcher, and anti-corruption activist. Currently she lends her skills to Come Back Alive, a charitable organization that began in 2014 when a small team purchased and delivered bulletproof vests to the front. In this wide-ranging conversation, Zoya reflects on war fatigue, U.S. politics, corruption, disinformation, and the extraordinary role of Ukrainian civil society—from investigative journalists to grassroots activists to the volunteer organizations.

On the State of the War

Zoya Krasovska: We’re at a very difficult point. The war is far from over, and people are exhausted. We need to move faster, gain more support, and put in more effort—but we don’t have the resources. These discussions about freezing the conflict or negotiating a temporary ceasefire may pause the fighting for a while, but they don’t bring sustainable peace.

Brian Gruber: What does “freezing” mean exactly—other than allowing Russia to rearm and return later? What, for you, is a realistic path to peace—or victory, or resolution—as a Ukrainian?

Zoya: For me, freezing the conflict is dangerous. It gives Russia time to rearm, regroup, and prepare for another round of aggression. Their partners supply them quickly, and their economy benefits from the pause. Meanwhile, Ukrainians suffer—physically, mentally, and emotionally—regardless of how far from the front they live.

A ceasefire can also create a false sense of safety inside and outside Ukraine, as if the war is over. But it isn’t. We still have huge areas under occupation and millions of Ukrainians living under Russian control or in captivity.

For me, the war ends only when every Ukrainian is free and returned from captivity.

Brian: What’s an ambitious but achievable way to get there?

Zoya: We need to put more pressure on Russia and make life harder for them. Diplomatic approaches haven’t worked. Negotiations only give Russia time, while we lose lives. Russia doesn’t want peace. And talk about Russian opposition taking power is unrealistic—they don’t have meaningful influence.

So the only way to stop Russia is physically—through military action—and by hitting their economy harder. Sanctions must become much more effective. Russia is a huge country, and while its economy is weakening, it's not happening fast enough. Every Russian family needs to feel the cost of this war. Only then might society turn against it.

On U.S. Politics and Global Security

Brian: What was your reaction to the Oval Office meeting where President Zelensky invited Vice President Vance to visit Ukraine, and Vance dismissed it as a "propaganda tour"?

Zoya: I come from a media background, so my reaction may have been influenced by that. At first, I didn't want to watch it. But social media was full of reactions, so I needed to see it myself.

Even though I was prepared, I found myself face-palming again and again. These were obvious, basic questions, and we've been explaining the reality of Russia for years. Anyone who wanted to know the truth had plenty of chances.

It's horrifying when people in such powerful positions ignore reality. It's not just dangerous for Ukraine or our president—it's dangerous for global security when leaders choose ignorance.

Brian: My country has become unreliable. At what point is European support—sanctions, military aid—enough to achieve your military objectives?

Zoya: The most important resource in this war is time. We lost so much in 2013 when the world refused to recognize Russian aggression as war. International monitors documented ceasefire violations daily, yet it was not called war. That delay cost lives.

The lesson for us and for Europe is: no one else is responsible for your security.

Ukrainians must be ready to fight alone. Europeans must stop relying on the U.S. and act as adults in the room. Progress is happening, but painfully slowly. Every day of delay means more funerals—friends, colleagues, journalists like Victoria Roshina, who was killed in captivity. Time lost is not abstract; it is human lives.

Brian: Earlier, you spoke about Zelensky's meeting with U.S. leaders. Many Ukrainians saw America's attitude as a betrayal, even though the U.S. has been a strong ally. If you could speak directly to Americans, what would you want them to understand?

Zoya: The most important thing I want people everywhere to know is that Ukrainians just want normal, boring lives. We want to build businesses, raise families, and live in peace. But right now, every single day is a struggle for survival. That reality exhausts us, and sometimes it makes us hard to understand.

When you meet someone whose daily routine is simply to stay alive, it's not "normal." People living safe, comfortable lives may struggle to grasp this.

After 11 years of war, I've learned that when I have resources, I must help those who don't—in Ukraine and beyond. Because Ukraine's war isn't just about Ukraine. It's about global security. It shows that the current world order isn't working, and that peace cannot be taken for granted.

If you want to live your normal, peaceful life, you need to stay informed and care about places like Ukraine—and about other countries facing authoritarian aggression. To remain fully human means to stay curious and empathetic to the suffering of others.

On Journalism and Media Literacy

Brian: Tell me about your journalism background.

Zoya: I started in 2008 in Zaporizhzhia at a local TV channel, then in Dnipro and later in Lviv. I reported on politics, corruption, and justice. In Dnipro, I also served as press secretary for a local NGO, monitoring corruption and supporting activists persecuted during Yanukovych's time. We ran campaigns to secure fair trials and supported Maidan activists.

In Lviv, I covered politics but also education, culture, and urban development—issues shaped by a more engaged civic culture.

Brian: With that experience, how important is journalism to sustaining democracy in Ukraine?

Zoya: Essential. Investigative journalism gave society the awareness that fueled Maidan. Even now, during war, journalists uncover what's happening inside government and security services.

Corruption is the red line for Ukrainians. When corruption is exposed, people protest. Free speech is more complicated. It's not yet a deeply rooted culture. During war, there's debate: should we restrict some platforms, or keep full transparency? For example, shutting down pro-Russian TV channels funded by Medvedchuk was necessary for national security, but outsiders didn't understand. Media literacy is still developing.

Brian: Americans lack media literacy too.

Zoya: Exactly. Both Ukraine and the U.S. face gaps between educated and uneducated citizens, which shapes how people absorb information. Russian propaganda exploits this brilliantly. It's not stupid; it's sophisticated. Even experts can fall for partial truths. That's what makes it so dangerous.

Brian: Is Russia the heavyweight world champion at disinformation?

Zoya: I'm biased—we study Russia more—but China is also powerful. Russia's propaganda is effective, and tragically many Western leaders believed it, especially Germany with its economic partnerships. They were charmed by the idea of Russia as a reliable partner, which was never true.

Brian: Who counters Russian propaganda?

Zoya: Ukrainians, partly. Some research institutes do excellent work on Russian elites and propaganda. Nordic countries are strong too; they emphasize media literacy, historical knowledge, and clear strategies against authoritarian threats.

Brian: In the U.S., when I was a child in New York, we were taught media literacy early. Even bus drivers discussed public policy. It astonishes me what people believe so readily.

Zoya: Democracy is like exercise. To stay fit, you must work daily. Freedom is not won once; it requires constant effort—reading, debating, staying curious. That's why I joined the Come Back Alive initiative. I accepted that the struggle for a safe Ukraine may last my whole life. My role is to keep society aware and strong, no matter the conditions.

On Corruption and Civil Society

Brian: Let's talk about corruption. Ukraine has struggled with this for decades, going back to the Soviet period and the rise of oligarchs afterward. What does corruption mean in this context, and how have Ukrainians fought to move toward a healthier democracy?

Zoya: I believe we've crossed a line where corruption is no longer tolerated. During the Soviet era, corruption was small-scale—chocolates for doctors, favors for local officials, connections to get basic services. After the collapse of the USSR, corruption shifted to the oligarchs, who seized huge economic assets.

But Ukrainians became more aware of democracy and global norms. For me, the peak of our anti-corruption movement was Euromaidan—the Revolution of Dignity. People went to the Maidan for different reasons: dignity, justice, European integration, freedom of travel, opposition to Yanukovych. But all shared the same demand: a transparent society where the state serves its citizens.

Journalists exposing Yanukovych's corruption played a huge role in motivating people. More than 100 Ukrainians died during and after the Maidan. We know our path to democracy has been paid for with lives. That's why Ukrainians have zero tolerance for corruption today.

Yes, corruption still exists—especially during wartime, when big budgets and international aid create temptations. But civil society oversight is at a very high level. Ukrainians understand that every misuse of resources costs lives.

As the cafe grew noisy, we moved the conversation outside for a second session.

Zoya: For Ukrainian civil society, corruption is a red line. During the full-scale invasion, there were several waves of very visible protests, and they were always connected to anti-corruption issues.

The first I remember was when the parliament tried to hide the public asset declarations of state officials. It wasn't a street protest, but there was a huge outcry on social media—petitions, media coverage, and grassroots activism. Ordinary people—not just professional activists—mobilized.

Another flashpoint came when the government's attitude toward NABU (the National Anti-Corruption Bureau) and the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office seemed to threaten their independence. Young people, many of whom were too young to participate in Maidan, became very active. Fighting corruption is central to Ukrainian identity, and any government that tries to undermine anti-corruption institutions will lose public support.

Brian: What was Zelensky's justification for these actions? What was the opposition to it, and what was the outcome?

Zoya: From what I read in the press, the justification was security. There were cases where prosecutors were found to be Russian agents. Those cases are now under investigation.

But the government failed to communicate clearly. Civil society responded that these measures were unacceptable. Protests grew stronger every day. It wasn't just a one-day demonstration—it became a process, a stance: "We won't stay silent. We want answers and results."

Eventually, President Zelensky said, "I hear the people." That showed how powerful civil society is in Ukraine—it can influence the president's decisions.

But finding the right balance is extremely difficult, especially during wartime. There's a very thin line between protecting security and maintaining openness. As a journalist, I've seen how access to information became much more restricted after the invasion. Sometimes, secrecy was justified. Other times, regional governments used it as an excuse to hide information they didn't want to disclose.

Ukrainians constantly face this tension—how to balance national security with democratic principles. We want to be a democracy, but we also know some information, if revealed, could endanger our defense.

On Come Back Alive

Brian: Let's talk about Come Back Alive. What does the organization do, and why is it important to you?

Zoya: I joined Come Back Alive in March this year, though I knew of the organization long before. It began in 2014, when one person started raising funds to buy supplies for soldiers. At that time, the Ukrainian army was weak and under-equipped.

Since then, Come Back Alive has grown into a major institution with about 170 staff. It has institutional memory that even government doesn't have, because while generals and commanders come and go, our staff continuously tracks how the army evolves, how technology changes, and what defense solutions are most effective.

What started as an initiative to supply soldiers is now a complex operation. For example, we recently launched a project to develop mobile units for maintaining F-16 aircraft—something no NGO has done before.

It might seem strange to outsiders that a charity foundation is working on military solutions, but Ukraine faces a much larger enemy. The government alone doesn't have enough resources. Civil society has stepped in as a partner.

We also act as a think tank. I work with analysts who study Russian elites and cooperate with Ukrainian services and international partners on issues of security and Russian aggression beyond the battlefield. We also study internal reforms in the military, especially around human capital. Soldiers are exhausted, many are dying, and it's difficult to find motivated, qualified personnel and instructors. One of our goals is to propose reforms to the General Staff to address this.

On Ukraine's Role in Global Democracy

Brian: You met a Ukrainian photographer and teacher in Italy who compared democracy in the U.S. to Ukraine in 2013.

Zoya: Yes. We met her in 2023, before the second Trump elections. She spoke sadly about democracy shrinking in the U.S. From her perspective, it was depressing, and it reminded us of 2013 in Ukraine, when protests against Yanukovych began. We thought, "Oh no, we know this experience," and asked, "How can we help you?" She laughed. But I think it's a good point—for Ukrainians to ask, "How can we help you?" the way we often ask Georgians.

Brian: Most Americans don't know their congressman or even the three branches of government. Meanwhile, Ukrainians—after the Revolution on Granite, the Orange Revolution, Euromaidan, and now the full-scale war—know what resistance means.

Zoya: For us, democracy isn't abstract. It's practical. Of course, when life is comfortable, people grow lazy and avoid politics. But in Ukraine, we must care. In some ways we're like a teenager nation—young, eager, full of energy, trying everything the global world offers. That gives us passion, but also responsibility to explain our agenda and share our experience.

Democracy is like exercise. To stay fit, you must work daily. Freedom is not won once; it requires constant effort—reading, debating, staying curious. I accepted that the struggle for a safe Ukraine may last my whole life. My role is to keep society aware and strong, no matter the conditions.

Lions of Lviv

In the heart of Lviv, I met Shannon Taft of Lions of Lviv at the city's iconic Dzyga Art Center—a cultural hub known for its galleries, café, and performances. Over tea, we spoke about why he came to Ukraine, how Lions of Lviv was born, and the urgent work of training hundreds of volunteers and soldiers in lifesaving TacMed skills.

Shannon Taft: A husband-and-wife NGO here in Lviv suggested it when I began my first civilian TacMed trainings. They said, why not create a social community to share trainings, photos, and connect with people? So I started Facebook and Instagram for Lions of Lviv, later adding a Linktree, *Buy Me a Coffee*, and a website.

Now I post TacMed and self-defense training resources. Just last week I held Lions of Lviv: Basic Self-Defense for the Street, teaching volunteers how to protect themselves—for example, walking home late at night.

Brian: You're a long way from home. What motivates you?

Shannon: At first, it was simply wanting to help Ukraine.

I planned to stay three weeks. But I realized how much I could do to help Ukrainians bear the burden of this war—by volunteering, training, and filling gaps where they lacked resources or expertise. That's why I'm still here.

Brian: What do you think you've achieved?

Shannon: We've trained more than 500 people—civilians, volunteers, and military—in combat lifesaver skills. Many of the volunteers now work on civilian evacuation at the front. We've trained four military units as well, including one deployed to the Sumy front the very day training ended.

I wish they never had to use these skills, but some have—and it may have saved lives.

Brian: What should Americans know about the situation here?

Shannon: The situation remains dire. Ukraine still needs help—volunteers, resources, and supplies. Ukrainians are mounting a gallant, resilient resistance to the Russian invasion, doing far

more to keep Americans safe than many realize, because so much of Russia’s effort is tied up here.

But they can’t do it alone. They need your continued support.

After our interview, I wandered upstairs with my friend Konrad and found myself at the final rounds of a poetry slam—a reminder that even in wartime, Lviv’s creative and cultural life pulses with energy.

And then, off I go to the Lviv–Holovnyi railway station for an overnight sleeper train to Kyiv.

Day 6: Kyiv

Waiting for my Airbnb check-in at a café a short walk from the Kyiv-Pasazhyrskyi central railway station, I notice a strong smell of body odor. I look around for the offender. It's me.

My initial physical sense after a full day of interviews in the Lviv summer sun, followed by an overnight sleeper-train ride, is discomfort. I need a shower. A change of clothes. I need to be prone in a proper bed. It's an unfamiliar, grotty physicality. And then—I start to like it.

It's something of an adrenaline hit, perversely liberating. The lovely café counter woman speaks no English, so I negotiate my order and mime a question about a restroom with a clumsy gesture. And then I realize I'm quite a sight: disheveled, dragging two backpacks, exhausted, odoriferous.

Maybe it's the double espressos. Maybe it's the boundless possibilities. I'm in a new city, in a historic moment, with extraordinary encounters ahead. No one knows where I am.

After checking into my rented flat, Oleksandr Serhiienko, a medical doctor and deputy head of the Blood Service of Ukraine, buzzes me to say he can meet at four. He picks me up in front of a Foxtrot shop by my flat with his director, Dmytro Koval, and takes me to a local Georgian restaurant to discuss the logistics and demands of their work since the invasion.

With the chaotic messaging coming from the White House about a rumored meeting with Putin in Alaska, I press them about a path to peace. I'm struck —again—by the honesty of the Ukrainians I've interviewed so far. No warmongering. No jingoism. No fantasies. They understand the task ahead.

Adam Monier Edwards and I titled our book on successful citizen movements *Surmountable* as it explored the dynamics of fighting against seemingly insurmountable odds. I traveled to Kyiv in 2019 to report on the EuroMaidan. And here I was again, listening as two men explained how a nation in crisis keeps blood moving to the front, while Georgian delicacies filled the table.

Inside Ukraine’s Wartime Blood System

“In the first weeks of the invasion, several countries offered to send blood. We thanked them, but declined. The system was working—and we knew how to scale.” —Dmytro Koval

Dmytro: I’m Director General of the Ukrainian Transplant Coordination Center. Since 2021, we’ve also coordinated the civilian blood system. When Russia launched the full-scale invasion, the Ministry of Health asked us to ensure the system could operate under wartime conditions.

We have *not* imported blood components during this war.

Brian: What did those first months look like—logistically and psychologically?

Oleksandr Serhiienko: We had to make many decisions immediately. For the first three months, we worked almost around the clock. We built a national coordination system linking blood centers and military units so we could respond rapidly anywhere in the country. We mobilize donors, move components nationwide, and deliver batches to where they’re needed. It’s been successful enough that we’ve shared the model with NATO partners.

Brian: How does coordination with the military work?

Dmytro: The systems are independent, but we exchange operational information. Military coordinators report needs and stock levels; civilian coordinators respond. When additional components are required, centers in Lviv or elsewhere away from the front prepare them. We consolidate and transport to near-front facilities for distribution.

Brian: Are donors experiencing fatigue?

Oleksandr: Ukrainians see blood donation as another front line. Campaigns like Your Blood Can Fight and The War Has No Holidays have raised unpaid donations. When needed, we can ramp up quickly.

Dmytro: Alongside volunteering and building FPV drones, blood donation is a concrete way civilians save lives.

Life Under Drones, and the Question of Endurance

Brian: Given the suffering you witness, has determination in Kyiv diminished?

Dmytro: We've all changed. Nighttime Shahed drone attacks have become routine—we know the sounds, monitor alerts, go to shelters. Then in the morning, we go to work.

Determination hasn't faded. We don't have that luxury.

Brian: What about the path forward?

Oleksandr: Ukrainians are more resolved than before. Talk of "brotherhood" with Russia has nearly disappeared. The great majority will continue to resist.

Dmytro: Maybe 30–40 percent are prepared to endure for a long time. Others can maintain a semblance of normal life because of the army and international support. Seeing busy restaurants after a day like ours can feel strange—but that normalcy is exactly what we're defending.

Brian: What keeps you going?

Dmytro: We're aiming for national-level results—we're not done. I've seen Ukraine change over 20 years; our potential is real.

Oleksandr: Our strength is also intellectual and technological. Warfare has changed—and Ukrainians are helping lead that change.

Comedy Under Fire

A short walk away is The Attic Space, where Kyiv's premiere stand-up comedians gather. As with Lviv's Dzyga, I'm drawn to these cultural meeting points. A show is being recorded in the next room, as Lana Chubakha kindly arranges interviews with several of Ukraine's leading comics. We talk about writing and performing during wartime.

The Attic Space sits at the top of a historic building in central Kyiv, occupying the entire fourth floor. Its creator, Vasyl Dvorko, calls it a "loft with soul." The phrase fits. Exposed beams, warm light, intentional clutter. It feels less like a venue than a refuge.

Makeup artists and stylists move quickly through the rooms. Costumes hang from racks. A television comedy series is preparing to shoot next door, filmed before a live audience. The air hums with nervous energy and familiarity—performers greeting one another like teammates before a match.

With the help of Lana, I move from comic to comic. What connects them is not only craft, but circumstance: the task of making people laugh during the fourth year of a full-scale invasion.

Anton Tymoshenko: Comedy With the Possibility of Death

Anton Tymoshenko is one of Ukraine's most respected stand-up comedians. Before the war, he filled venues of thousands. During the war, even success feels muted.

"I once filled a venue with 3,500 people," he tells me. "It was a huge show. But it happened during the war, so it didn't feel as amazing as I expected."

The war, he says, is everywhere—including onstage.

"Comedy during war is like dentistry or driving during war—it's the same as before, except with the possibility of death."

Audiences arrive knowing that an air-raid siren could interrupt the set. Or worse. Anton has a joke where he asks who goes to the shelter when the sirens sound. Only a handful of hands go up.

"That's great," he tells them. "That means I don't need new material. I'll just have a new audience every time."

The humor is dark, precise, and necessary. Ukrainians don't wait for tragedy to fade before laughing—because another tragedy arrives too quickly.

Anton sees his role clearly. Stand-up doesn't fight on the front lines, but it raises money. His shows fund weapons, gear, supplies.

"That's my mission," he says. "Using my popularity to help kill Russian invaders."

Ukrainian comedy, he explains, is still young—barely fifteen years old—but the war accelerated its growth. Clubs emerged because performers built them themselves. If you wanted stage time, you created the stage.

Online, the ecosystem exploded: YouTube shows, livestreams, improvised panels modeled loosely on Western formats but infused with Ukrainian urgency. Grassroots, fast, alive.

Anton's influences are unapologetically political: Doug Stanhope. George Carlin.

He has little patience for what he sees as safe or trivial comedy elsewhere.

"There are wars, disasters, huge moral questions—and you're stuck on that? It feels small."

For Americans, his message is blunt.

"There's a war. Russia attacked. That's the fact. Stop treating Putin like a game piece. People are dying every day."

Yehor Shatailo: Comedy Doesn't Heal—It Reflects

Yehor Shatailo has been performing for a decade. He makes a living. He sells specials online. He fills halls of hundreds, sometimes a thousand.

Stand-up in Ukraine, he says, feels both young and fully formed.

The war reshaped the material, but not the purpose.

"Comedy doesn't heal people," he says flatly. "That's nonsense. It's like asking what it's like to give a haircut during the war. Everything just kind of sucks."

People still go to work. Still watch TV. Still want to laugh. Pain, he explains, creates new angles—but it requires judgment.

"If you're a professional comedian, you learn what to touch and what to avoid."

Missile strikes are part of daily life. You can joke around them—carefully—from a human angle rather than a sensational one. Comedy reflects the environment. The craft adapts.

Yehor describes a structured but self-organized ecosystem: clubs run by collectives, long-term leased venues, nightly open mics. Advancement comes through repetition and recognition, not gatekeepers.

Attic Space is one of those venues—rented, staged, produced by the comedians themselves.

“I don’t do this because things are dire,” he tells me. “I’d do it in peaceful times too. Shared laughter is just a byproduct of doing what I love.”

Hanna Kochehura: Laughing as a Form of Precision

Hanna Kochehura is a stand-up comedian and freelance copywriter. She’s been performing for eight years. Stand-up appealed to her because she could do it alone.

“I’m not a team player,” she says, smiling.

She’s drawn to observational and existential humor—Dylan Moran rather than punch-down politics—but since the invasion, everything became political whether she wanted it to or not.

“It’s impossible for humor not to be political now, because everything is political.”

Hanna introduces a term I hadn’t heard before: *“unbound people”*—those untouched by war but full of opinions about how Ukrainians should experience it.

“I don’t know how to write comedy for unbound people,” she says. “They’re not into real dark comedy.”

Ukrainians, she explains, now track elections around the world because foreign results can determine survival.

“Unfortunately, I now know the names of world leaders from countries I never cared about.”

Asked about Trump and Putin possibly meeting in Alaska, her humor turns sharp.

“Maybe the U.S. will lose territory in our war,” she jokes. “That would be hilarious.”

And then, without blinking: “It would also be funny if a bear attacked both of them.”

Zelensky’s comedy background comes up naturally.

“He understands timing,” Hanna says. “Delivery. How to perform a text. Comedy teaches you how to communicate—and that matters.”

A Community in Real Time

Between interviews, the performers shift roles effortlessly: colleagues, artists, wartime citizens, producers. They prepare to perform while absorbing the news of the day. Drones overhead. Missiles elsewhere. Laughter here.

They are not escaping the war. They are metabolizing it—in public.

The show is starting next door. I’ll attend. It’s in Ukrainian, of course, as was the poetry slam yesterday at Dzyga in Lviv. I won’t understand a word, but the emotional content speaks volumes: the body language, the laughter of the audience, the stylized gestures, the movement of the cameras.

I’ll enjoy the privilege of being a fly on the wall.

Day 7: Kyiv

Igor Goes to War

My first air-raid siren came not in a bunker or during a sprint for shelter, but mid-conversation, walking past the vast World War II memorial complex in Kyiv. It was brief. Igor barely reacted. The city is used to them now. Most people no longer dash for cover.

A kind of *fuck Russia* energy hangs in the air.

“You don’t get to dominate my life.”

Igor Tseuniv had invited me to visit the Sumy region where he is currently based, but it’s far, and his commanding officer instead gave him permission to come meet me in Kyiv. An added bonus: he gets to spend time with his young daughter.

Before the war, Igor earned a Ph.D. and was building a career as a historian and archaeologist. When Russia invaded, he volunteered for the infantry. His hometown of Bucha became synonymous with murder, rape, torture, and destruction. His father was killed during the leveling of Mariupol.

When I ask why he volunteered, he shrugs. There was no doubt.

Three years later, as he and his peers protect villages from similar fates, he stays in the fight. His marriage did not survive the war—an all-too-common casualty.

We meet for lunch first. I’m not here for the food, but I’m enjoying daily discoveries.

We order Poltavan specialties—borscht, *galushky*, potato pancakes—at a restaurant owned by a well-known Ukrainian chef working to revive traditional cuisine.

Roman Osadchuk joins us. Igor says he can interpret if needed, but as often happens during this trip, Igor ends up doing just fine in English. He says it’s his first real chance to practice in three years.

Roman is from the Dnipro region, a senior lecturer at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, and the Director of Threat Intelligence at an IT startup focused on Russian disinformation—*the pollution of the infospace*. He earned his master’s degree in the United States.

The Struggle for Donbas

When I ask Igor about the persistent Russian claim that Russian speakers in eastern Ukraine were persecuted—and that Moscow intervened in Donbas out of compassion—he doesn't hesitate.

Language, he says, was never the real issue.

The core driver was money and power.

Donbas has long been an industrial region, rich in coal and heavy industry, and from its beginnings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was shaped by waves of migration. Under the Soviet Union, this migration was not accidental.

Russian became dominant not because of ethnicity, Igor explains, but because of ideology.

Soviet propaganda promoted Russian as the language of international communism and the proletariat. Ukrainian, by contrast, was treated as backward—bourgeois or nationalist—and therefore suspect.

To speak Ukrainian and openly identify as Ukrainian marked you, in Soviet logic, as someone outside the proper communist order.

After independence, Igor recalls, language barely registered as a political issue. The 1990s were economically brutal. People were focused on survival, not identity. Regional elites cared about money and control, not reform or nation-building.

That changed later—especially after the Orange Revolution.

Identity became a political weapon.

Igor remembers seeing flags of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic years before 2014, long before Russia claimed to be responding to an emergency. Those ideas, he says, only became viable because Russia funded them—money for propaganda, organization, and eventually armed structures.

The discontent was real, particularly among older people who remembered the stability of Soviet life. But it was deliberately exploited.

People were told Kyiv was stealing from them. What they weren't told was that the coal industry was massively subsidized and that profits were being captured by local oligarchs and external interests.

The grievance was genuine.

The explanation was false.

Polluting the Infospace

I ask how Russian speakers feel now, in cities Russia claims to have liberated.

Igor is blunt. Under occupation, fear governs everything. People have only Russian television, Russian internet. Over time, repetition becomes reality. Even his own relatives in occupied territory are afraid to speak with him because he's in the Ukrainian army.

Roman explains the broader strategy. Russian disinformation isn't about persuasion. It's about chaos.

Flood the zone. Offer endless alternative explanations until certainty erodes.

People don't become pro-Russian. They become unsure what to believe.

Igor was living in Bucha when the invasion began. For someone like him—an intellectual, a historian—occupation meant prison or worse.

When, in March, his father was killed during the Russian military's leveling of Mariupol, "There was no choice."

He spent his first year as infantry on multiple fronts. He suffered two concussions. Now he works logistics and drones.

You do whatever is needed.

Walking Through History

After lunch, Roman heads back to work. Igor and I walk.

We pass through Kyiv's historic heart—cathedrals, memorials, museums, and the physical residue of war. Burned-out Russian vehicles sit in open-air graveyards. Triumphal Z symbols are crossed out in blue paint and replaced with blunt messages: *go fuck yourself*.

An intercontinental ballistic missile looms overhead. I lean over to touch it. Igor cheerfully suggests it may once have been aimed at my childhood neighborhood in Brooklyn.

The Holodomor

We pause near the Holodomor Museum, which combines a contemplative outdoor memorial with a Hall of Memory and exhibits of documents, testimony, artifacts, and multimedia.

The Holodomor was a man-made famine imposed by Stalin and the Soviet regime in 1932–1933, deliberately engineered through forced collectivization, grain seizures, travel bans, and punitive quotas that denied Ukrainians access to food.

An estimated 3.5 to 5 million people were starved to death.

Alongside mass starvation, the USSR carried out the targeted murder, imprisonment, and deportation of thousands of Ukrainian intellectuals, writers, clergy, and cultural leaders—the Executed Renaissance—as part of a coordinated project to suppress Ukrainian language, culture, and national identity.

Fear followed generations.

Nationalism, Then and Now

I ask about Ukrainian nationalism, specifically the controversial Stepan Bandera.

Igor traces it first to poets—Shevchenko, Franko, Ukrainka—who formed a language and cultural identity in the nineteenth century. Later came political struggle.

Bandera, Igor says carefully, was a radical nationalist. He fought Polish authorities and the Soviets. He was imprisoned by the Nazis. His movement used violence.

“Good or bad? Big question.”

What matters to him is historical understanding, not mythmaking—by Ukrainians or by Russians.

I ask about Azov—the word Russia uses endlessly to justify invasion. His t-shirt reads, “Free Azov.”

Azov, Igor says, means many things: the sea, the steelworks, the brigade. For him, it first means the defenders of Mariupol.

He doesn’t deny the brigade’s origins among radical nationalist subcultures. He rejects the idea that this justifies their extermination.

“Radical ideas are not a reason to kill people.”

Before we part, I ask what he wants Americans to understand about his decision to resist.

“Because I have no other choice,” he says. “They want to kill us.”

Then he reframes it as a simple human question:

If someone wants to kill you, what do you do?

From Zelensky’s Comedy Writer to War-Crimes Witness

Oleksandr Shchur loves this neighborhood. His assistant set up our meeting at Kontraktova Square in Podil—where parts of his acclaimed film *Bucha* were shot—and we climb toward a panoramic view of Kyiv and the Dnipro. As Shchur points out historic landmarks along Andriyivskyy Descent, past St. Andrew’s Church (Andriivska Tserkva), we talk about Russia’s invasion and his years as a comedy writer for his friend Volodymyr Zelensky. He conceived, produced, and scripted the film, working closely with the director and cast to deliver an unflinching docudrama of the short-lived occupation northwest of the capital.

Bucha tells the true story of Konstantin Gudauskas, a Kazakhstani granted asylum in Ukraine, who used his ability to pass Russian checkpoints to evacuate more than 200 civilians from Bucha and nearby towns during the spring 2022 occupation. I watched the film before our meeting: it’s taut, anxiety-charged, and an intimate look at the now well-documented horrors that accompanied Russia’s failed attempt to seize Kyiv.

Brian: First of all, where are we now, and why do you like this neighborhood?

Oleksandr Shchur: We’re in the heart of Kyiv’s Podil, on Andriyivskyy Descent. It’s a very artistic street. During the day there are many artists and vendors, and St. Andriivska Church is just up the hill. There are souvenir stalls, and it’s a beautiful place to walk. Whenever new people come to Kyiv, I bring them here for the views.

In recent years many murals have been painted across Ukraine—some by famous international artists who offered their work as a gift. Before the war this street was crowded; people are returning now, though not as many as before. What’s good is that people still believe they will live in a free Ukraine. In winter, when there’s snow, you even see people skiing here.

Brian: On all these cobblestones—yes! Sometimes if the taxi is an older model, the ride can be… exciting.

Oleksandr: Exactly. I also love this district because it reminds me of Odesa, my neighbor city on the Black Sea. Most buildings here were constructed from the late 19th to early 20th centuries.

Brian: Why did you decide to produce and write *Bucha*?

Oleksandr: I'm an experienced writer, and I wanted to do for my country what I do best—make films that show what happened in Ukraine. We tried to make the movie honest, and also engaging for audiences who don't know much about the war. Our goal is to show it as widely as possible. I've organized many screenings in the United States and will continue. We've screened at the Vatican and in the European Parliament, and we'll keep going.

Brian: As we walked up and down the hill, we talked about the film's political messages. Beyond being based on a true story and a compelling drama, what did you want the movie to say about the war, the world, and the spread of autocracy?

Oleksandr: I think the film carries two main messages. The first isn't ours originally—it's from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, often paraphrased by John F. Kennedy: "The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of moral crisis." It's a reminder to everyone that you can't claim to be a good person and ignore that people are dying in Ukraine every night—children are dying every night.

The second message is that we show what Russian imperialism really is—what Russia wants. Putin and Russian propagandists can lie about many things, but their goal is to rebuild an empire—whether you call it the Soviet Union or the Russian Empire. They will pursue that goal until they are stopped by other nations.

Brian: Tell me about your experience with President Zelensky.

Oleksandr: I began as a comedy writer. I worked with Volodymyr Zelensky for 15 years when he was still an actor, writing comedy films and sketches for him. When he became president, I became an independent producer. I've known him for about 20 years.

Brian: What did you see in him back then that might explain the leader we see today?

Oleksandr: Now he looks very tired—he's aged, understandably. But he always had an open, truthful quality. Working with him was joyful: when you write comedy you're constantly trading jokes—"Is this good? Not good?"—and laughing together. Those were good times. I hope we will return to them.

Brian: What made him a good comedian and actor?

Oleksandr: He felt truthful. You believe him—he's the kind of person you could meet on the street. He was very open and willing to engage, to negotiate.

Brian: You spent about six months in the United States trying to distribute your movie. What would you want Americans to know about what's happening in Ukraine—especially those who support Ukraine and those who might be confused?

Oleksandr: First, I want to thank the American people. They've provided a lot of help—ordinary Americans, not just the government. Many Ukrainians are now living in the USA.

But there's one very important thing to understand: all Ukrainians want peace. If anyone says Ukrainians don't want peace, that's nonsense. We truly want it, but we need guarantees. If we simply give Russia territory without guarantees, we help them continue their conquest and kill more people. When we believe Russia will stop, Ukraine will not try to reconquer its lands—we can wait, like the Baltic states waited for decades, and eventually regain freedom. The main point is: this is about our lives. If Russia comes here, I will be ordered to leave—or imprisoned—and the same fate could meet my family.

Living With Air-Raid Sirens

Brian: I heard an air-raid siren a few hours ago while walking near the WWII memorial. We didn't think much of it. With missile and drone attacks continuing, how do people in Kyiv adapt—and how are they affected?

Oleksandr: There are two sides. Many people have gotten used to drone and missile attacks; some no longer go to shelters because some weeks there are alerts every day. But people do die, and psychologically everyone is very tired. When you can't confront those harming you—Russia, Putin—anger turns on people nearby. Online there's a lot of hate, searching for "traitors," even though everyone knows who's guilty. People volunteer, donate, fight. City-dwellers often feel all they can do is donate—and that's hard psychologically.

Brian: What I keep hearing is a shared determination: people won't accept living under Russian oppression, and won't abandon those under occupation. What's the attitude toward resistance—and what outcome feels achievable?

Oleksandr: If Ukrainians could truly believe Russia would stop attacking, many might even agree to give up some territory. The problem is guarantees. We had the Budapest Memorandum and a treaty of peace and friendship—Russia tore them up. If Donbas is handed over "for free," it becomes a fortress for further conquest. Everyone wants peace, but giving territory without guarantees only helps Russia conquer faster.

In two years, Russia hasn't taken a major city. Their economy is struggling. If Europe stays firm and U.S. support resumes, Russia can't fight indefinitely. Sanctions plus weapons will shorten the war. Cultural work matters too: when Americans understand what's happening, they pressure politicians not to betray Ukraine.

On U.S. Politics and Putin

Brian: Trump frequently appears compromised by Moscow. Do you think he can align with American public support for Ukraine?

Oleksandr: I don't think he's "owned" by Russia. He sees the world through power—who can impose rules. That's why he "understands" Putin. My prediction hasn't changed: meetings are theater. Putin will continue the war as long as he can and stop only when the Russian economy collapses. The fastest road to peace is sanctions plus weapons for Ukraine.

What Americans should understand is simple: many Ukrainians fight because we have no future in a Russia-occupied Ukraine. If Russia captures more, some will flee, some will be imprisoned, some killed. And Europe will face huge new refugee flows.

Russia also forces captured populations into its wars. They did it in Chechnya; they do it with Ukrainians from occupied areas. If they conquered all of Ukraine, they'd push Ukrainians to fight against Poland, the Baltics, Romania. This is imperial practice—it's not new. History shows it again and again.

Brian: One thing your film *Bucha* shows is how disinformation works through people and into the world.

Oleksandr: The most dangerous people are intelligent but lack empathy. For the colonel character, I wanted to show a very smart man without compassion. When you read the private writings and conversations of past ideologues, they can sound cultured—discussing art and history—then pivot to mass murder as if it were normal. That combination is terrifying.

Writing and Producing During War

Brian: How did you write the film?

Oleksandr: I collected accounts and interviews, then built a metaphorical layer using Dante to give the story artistic structure. You write, rewrite, work with the director, then actors bring changes—it's nonstop. Writers joke you never finish a script; you just stop writing.

Brian: Were you on set?

Oleksandr: Yes—and I was also a producer. We took no government money; early in the war, funds were needed for defense. We raised about $600,000 from donations and sponsors—many from the U.S., Canada, and Poland, including Russians who emigrated and hate Putin. When we showed the film to an Apple team, they guessed the budget was several million based on the look. We're seeking a major distributor—Apple, Amazon, Netflix—because reach is the mission.

Casting the Lead and the Antagonist

Brian: Your lead's performance is restrained and powerful.

Oleksandr: He's Cezary Łukaszewicz from Poland. We wanted a foreigner because the real protagonist is Kazakh, not Ukrainian. We also contacted well-known British actors—even Benedict Cumberbatch's team replied politely but was unavailable.

Brian: The colonel is chilling but complex.

Oleksandr: He's played by Vyacheslav Dovzhenko, a famous Ukrainian actor who usually plays "good guys." Many actors refused to play Russians; I asked him to stretch. The character is composite—part FSB officer who granted burial permissions, part executioner documented by human-rights reporting. We also wanted to show the current Russian imperial ideology: intelligent men without empathy are dangerous.

Brian: How do you navigate culture and language now?

Oleksandr: I grew up speaking Russian—in Odesa and even in Kyiv. After the invasion my family switched to Ukrainian; with our son we use only Ukrainian (and later English). I understand those who can't bear Russian culture now—time is needed. Many Ukrainians watch videos of atrocities daily; those memories will last. Peace is possible, but it can take decades for wounds to cool.

Brian: Where does distribution stand?

Oleksandr: We've sold to Japan, France, Germany, Poland, Portugal, and Latin America. In the U.S., our sales agent is negotiating; we also pass along contacts. I'll show the film anywhere people will watch—parliaments, churches, small cinemas—because shared viewing travels the story farther than press releases.

Brian: How's your family?

Oleksandr: My son is three. He was born in evacuation. My wife and child spent two years in Germany; we decided to return so I could be present.

After Hours at Squat 17B

A squat is the occupation of an unused or abandoned building without paying rent or holding a formal lease. In Ukraine, many activist, artistic, or countercultural groups began squatting after the economic collapse of the 1990s. In the local creative scene, *squat* has also become a kind of brand identity—signaling an unconventional, artistic, or quietly rebellious space.

Dmytro Danica invites me to spend an evening at Squat 17B.

As with nearly all my meetings on this trip, the invitation comes through a chain of introductions. The idea of *six degrees of separation* suggests that any two people can be connected through a short chain of intermediaries. In my experience, when you approach someone with an earnest request—an introduction from an introduction—you can get to almost anyone.

I enter the courtyard and it's a marvelous scene—summer-in-New-York energy, but unmistakably Ukrainian. A jazz trio plays *Summertime* as a local woman tap-dances on a makeshift stage. Children bounce on their parents' laps. Friends cluster in small groups, enjoying a perfect Kyiv evening.

At the entrance, I'm told to drop a donation, grab a folding chair, and join the crowd. The bar is inside. I watch the band and dancer for a while.

Dmytro arrives, stylish and immediately warm. Either Ukrainians are intensely friendly or the nature of these encounters creates instant solidarity. He walks me inside to buy me a drink. The bartender asks what I want. I tell him to surprise me with a favorite concoction.

He pours tequila—shaken, not stirred.

Lviv and Kyiv are vibrant, progressive, creative cities. I could live in either. This place rocks.

We go upstairs to a small table overlooking the space below. One of the outside walls bears a scar from a rocket strike. I ask Dmytro to tell me about his life inside a city under sustained assault.

Normalcy as a Political Act

Brian: Where are we now? And why do you like this place?

Dmytro: We are in Squat 17B, one of the iconic pubs of Kyiv. It's not the posh kind of place you'd expect to see on TripAdvisor, but this was an original squat. People truly lived here. The building was abandoned. They lived here without permission. They supplied water. They somehow laid a telephone cable. Hilarious place.

These terrace buildings were stables in the 19th century—places where servants lived. You can see the crack in the wall, which got even bigger when a rocket hit directly inside here.

The place is absolutely lovely. Brilliant food. Even more brilliant cocktails. But I prefer good old beer.

Brian: Tell me about the rocket attack.

Dmytro: It was about a year and a half ago, early in the war. Everything was paralyzed. And this pub opened its doors for a concert.

Early spring, my band and I held a charity concert here. We raised funds for one of the best FPV pilot schools—a school I'm proud to be an alumnus of. That school was literally started in this pub.

Brian: What does *squat* mean, by the way?

Dmytro: Squat is just like in America—*hippity hoppity, get off my property.* People come and start living in interesting, abandoned places. Not in an abusive way.

We're in the very heart of the city. Taras Shevchenko University is just across the street. A hundred years ago, this was the periphery. This place is made by its inhabitants and visitors—and they are brilliant.

"Otherwise, We Are Long Gone"

Brian: You talked before about your love for the city. What was it like psychologically—living a daily city life and suddenly having 150,000 Russian troops massing at the border?

Dmytro: Let's skip the scary part people usually tell to make things spicy.

First, there was a great sense of unity and purpose. Among those who stayed—and I stayed—there was mutual help, being kind to each other.

Districts were isolated. I live in one encircled by water—an island in the geographical center of Kyiv. It became a fortress.

Other districts were broken apart. People couldn't visit elderly relatives. That care was taken over by strangers. You'd see IT engineers on electric scooters helping someone's *babushka*.

"We were just like one team."

There were periods of total curfew. I recorded samples of how quiet the city became—something you never hear in a multi-million-person metropolis.

It was early spring. From my 15th floor I could see the Dnipro River, the right bank of the city. Stillness. Quiet. A sense that my ancient city was prepared for the job.

Brian: After three years and a stalemate on the Eastern Front—what's the path forward?

Dmytro: Given the uncertainties—and the orange man in charge of the United States changing his mind several times a day—it's hard to say what happens next.

Nobody knows. Anyone who says they do is guessing.

Brian: Why resist?

Dmytro:
Because otherwise we are long gone.

"When the dark times came for my country, I was here."

I wanted people to see that I did everything in my responsibility to help. This war brought me to places I never dreamed of visiting. If someone had told me that before, I'd have thought they were mad.

Brian: How does creating and performing change in wartime?

Dmytro: Here's the dark part. It lost sense.

Culture usually tells the world who we are. But every day someone is killed. Every day a neighborhood is destroyed. Blast waves throw people out of their windows.

So I'm thinking: I'm here composing, performing—and on that scale, I'm losing this entire disposition.

Love Under the Flight Path

She is a Tactical Combat Casualty Care instructor and military paramedic. Before the invasion, she was a game developer writing C++ at Ubisoft. Now she trains combat medics and frontline soldiers—one of a small number of people in Ukraine qualified to teach pre-hospital blood transfusion.

Her life, she tells me, has changed completely.

"Being in love during war is sharper—more intense."

Every meeting with friends or loved ones carries the knowledge that it could be the last. A drone. A missile. A moment of bad luck.

Why does Ukraine continue to resist?

“This is our only motherland,” Tosh says. Surrender is not a political calculation. After Bucha, after seeing mass killing and sexual violence, she understood this war is not about land or language—it is about extermination.

For her, it is a test: whether democracy is stronger than autocracy, and whether truth and freedom still matter.

As night settles in, Dmytro introduces me to Darya Kryzh, co-founder of Squat 17B Yard Café and Art Space. She gives us a brief tour downstairs.

In one of those coincidences that collapse distance in an instant, I learn that she has been visiting my Thai island home, Koh Phangan, every year for the past decade—spending time just a few hundred meters from my house.

After twelve hours of walking Kyiv and gathering stories, Dmytro and Tosh drive me home.

Day 8: Kyiv

“Music Always Brings Me Back”

How does art survive—and transform—amid air-raid sirens, missile strikes, and shattered infrastructure?

In Kyiv, I met Evhen Malyarevsky, founder and conductor of Ukraine’s largest amateur choir. We spoke in a roadside café on a busy, tree-lined street, the ordinary hum of city life punctuated by the extraordinary conditions of wartime. Our conversation ranged from music and metal to rage, resilience, and why singing together has become a form of collective therapy.

Evhen Malyarevsky: My name is Evhen Malyarevsky. I’m a choir conductor. Also, a YouTuber. For the last four years, I’ve led the biggest amateur choir in Ukraine—actually, just the biggest choir overall—Velykyi Ukrainskyi Khor Amatoriv, the Great Ukrainian Amateur Choir, or V.U.Kh.A.

Brian: What training prepared you for this?

Evhen: I have a university degree in music from the Kharkiv National University of Arts. I studied piano and choir conducting. And I have a lot of practice. I worked in other choirs—as a singer and as a conductor—before this.

Brian: Why this work? Why now?

Evhen: Several times I tried to move away from music. But I can’t. Music always brings me back to itself. I don’t really believe in destiny—but probably music is just my way.

Why People Sing Together

Brian: Why do people come to the choir and give so much of their time?

Evhen: There are many reasons. First—it’s just cool. It’s cool to sing with a lot of other people. You feel a deep connection.

And right now, during the full-scale invasion, it works like group therapy. When you’re with other people, you don’t feel so alone.

It’s also a way to get onto big stages, into large concert halls, to be part of performances you would never access otherwise.

Art as Resistance

Brian: In what way is what you do a political act?

Evhen: Right now, every performance, every concert, every piece of art is political. Everything is a political statement.

If you record something in Ukrainian, if you sing Ukrainian songs—it matters. It tells the world that we exist. That we have something to share. Feelings. Thoughts.

So yes—everything is political now.

Classical Music, Metal Energy

Brian: What music do you love?

Evhen: Obviously classical music. And if we’re talking genres—metal.

Brian: Is it possible to do a metal choral group?

Evhen: Everything is possible. But metal is stressful for many people. For me, it’s a way to charge myself. It gives me aggressive emotional energy.

Creating on an Emotional Roller Coaster

Brian: How does wartime creation differ from peacetime?

Evhen: Sometimes it’s easier. Sometimes it’s much harder.

After a missile attack, or a stupid political statement—from our politicians or foreign ones—you feel angry. And that anger gives you energy to put into art. It sounds bad, but it works. Sometimes it helps.

Other times you feel completely exhausted. Empty. And it’s very hard to create when there’s nothing inside.

It’s like a roller coaster. Constant ups and downs. And you just get used to it. You try to do your best.

The Work Behind the Music

Brian: You arrange all the choral work. What does that process look like?

Evhen: It's skill, passion, and a lot of time. At the start of a concert season, I work constantly—I need fifteen or sixteen songs for one concert.

It's hard to explain. You take a song. Listen very carefully. Analyze melody and harmony. And then you try to put part of yourself into it—arranging it for different voices, different instruments.

People romanticize music creation. But really—it's work. You just sit down, take a song, and do it.

Resilience, Not Strength

Brian: How have these three years changed you—as a man, an artist, a Ukrainian?

Evhen: It's hard to reflect when it's not over. Maybe I could answer in five years—if the war has ended.

Right now, we are constantly changing. I don't think I became stronger. I think I became more resilient.

Brian: As an American, I have to ask: how do you experience the unpredictability of U.S. support for Ukraine?

Evhen: I got used to it. I think we shouldn't rely on support from the U.S. or Europe.

So I don't really react anymore. Trump is crazy—absolutely insane. I don't understand how he became president. What world do we live in?

I don't hope for anything.

Brian: What does a just and sustainable peace look like to you?

Evhen: I don't want to say I don't believe in peace. But I don't see how this war ends.

The only real change would come from Putin's death and political instability inside Russia. Maybe then there's a chance—to restore our borders, to become fully independent again.

Otherwise—I don't see it.

Looking Ahead

Brian: What are you excited about for the coming year with the choir?

Evhen: I have many plans. But I don't like to share them too far ahead. It's not superstition—I just think you waste energy talking instead of doing.

But yes—at least two concerts. Probably an album recording. We'll see.

Weaving Identity Back Together

Karina Gaeva greets me warmly in *Paradise*, her bright studio on Kyiv's Kontraktova Square. The name is painted high on the wall above a stone fireplace, half-ironic, half-aspirational. "Welcome to my paradise," she says with a smile. "This is where I work and where I find inspiration."

The studio feels both cozy and functional—textiles, garments, tools, tea cups. Her husband Nick joins us, offering tea from their other venture, Tea Gardens, which operates two shops in Kyiv and an online store.

Karina walks me around the eclectic space, handcrafted over time, bit by bit. "Since 2017, I've been deeply interested in old Ukrainian textile techniques," she tells me, "especially *vyshyvka vibika*. It's very important to me because it connects directly to Ukrainian history and tradition."

She creates contemporary clothing that incorporates vibika patterns—ancient techniques rendered through modern design. That impulse animates her current collaboration, *Symbols of Identity*, a project devoted to reviving vibika and reconnecting Ukrainians at home and abroad. On August 24—Ukraine's Independence Day—participants in more than ten countries will simultaneously create a 21st-century collection of vibika towels.

Each participant receives a box containing hemp fabric produced in Ukraine, handmade printing stamps, and simple instructions. From there, the designs are their own. To demonstrate the concept, she and Nick

laughingly insist I play with project tools and materials and guide me through a rudimentary design exercise. I use the templates, achieving artistic glory commensurate with my primary-school art skills.

As with many of the couples I meet and interview, their relationship is part mundane daily romance, part entrepreneurial collaboration, part resistance to Russian occupation.

Some of the patterns draw directly from historic Ukrainian textiles housed in the National Museum of Decorative Arts in Kyiv. One of Karina's collaborators, museum curator Oksana Romanko, is recreating motifs from those archival works, allowing centuries-old designs to reappear through new hands.

The completed pieces will first be presented online and then exhibited physically at the Ukrainian Museum of Creative Arts in Kyiv. In 2026, the collection will tour internationally before returning to Ukraine for permanent display.

The logistics are ambitious, but Karina speaks about the project less as an exhibition than as a form of reconnection.

"Because it tells the truth about Ukrainian history," she says when I ask why the project matters. "It builds *ob'yednannya*—connection—between Ukrainians who live here and those who live abroad. It's about our hearts, our shared identity."

Nick adds context. "Before the war, Ukrainians rarely talked openly about identity. Propaganda promoted the idea that Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus shared one Slavic culture. But history shows that isn't true. This project helps people rediscover who they really are."

Karina nods. "Now people understand how important that is."

She tells me that she had been living in Vienna for a time after the full-scale invasion began but eventually chose to return.

"I felt I had lost connection—with my life and with my true self," she says. "Coming back to Ukraine restored that connection."

Nick is heading over to one of their shops, and I ask if I can tag along to sample their teas and do a few hours of work. While in their artfully

decorated space, the staff gifts me a stash of directly sourced white tea that I secure in my backpack to enjoy back home.

Creating Under Fire

In Kyiv, studios double as sanctuaries—and sometimes as targets.

Later in the day, I cross the city to visit another artist working in a very different register. Where Karina's work gathers fragments of Ukrainian identity and sends them outward into the world, Andrey Datura's work has been forged in close proximity to the war itself.

Andrey is an art director by day and a contemporary artist and photographer by night. For the past year, he has worked inside a former Soviet institute now repurposed as a kind of creative squat—a vast complex where artists renovate raw spaces and pay minimal rent, often little more than utilities.

The industrial building hums with diverse activity: print installations on one floor, sneaker production on another, studios stacked above and beside each other. "It's a huge place to make something," Andrey says. "The owner is open to artists coming here and building something new."

In 2022, in the first months after Russia's full-scale invasion, Andrey and his friends began painting military trucks in camouflage to send to the front. By autumn, he was traveling with friends to Bakhmut. The battle for control of Bakhmut, in the eastern oblast of Donetsk, lasted nine months and was one of the largest and most important battles of the war.

Andrey had no official role, no press credentials. "In the beginning of the war, there was no officiality," he tells me. "A lot of people went by themselves." He bought his own equipment, paid a soldier to drive them closer to the front, and began documenting what he saw.

He shows me photographs from inside Bakhmut—images captured while artillery landed nearby. In one, a tank moves toward the camera through a shattered frame of glass. In another, a commander sits motionless inside a bomb shelter, lit by a single source of light. Andrey set the camera on a tripod and used a long exposure. The commander's arm remains sharp while the rest of the frame softens, as if time itself were suspended.

“There were strange, cinematic moments happening all the time,” he says. “Even in very bad times.”

He describes running across open ground to capture a different angle after gunfire paused, only to have shooting resume moments later. Other soldiers shouted at him—half joking, half not—that he wasn’t human, that only a photographer would do something so reckless.

Alongside the photography, Andrey used spray paint to mark territory—painting symbolic emblems and unit insignia on ruined walls at the edges of contested zones. Art as morale and presence.

The work became part of a larger effort. Together with other creatives, Andrey helped build an online platform to collect donations. They raised funds for military aid, food, and medical supplies, sending what they could back to the front.

After touring the studio and showing me dozens of photos and videos on his large monitor, Andrey drives me through the surrounding neighborhood, pointing out apartment buildings struck by Russian missiles and drones over the past two years. Some have been hit once, others repeatedly.

“My building has been hit twice,” he says. “The building next to it—maybe four times.” He shows me photos on his phone: floors sheared away, windows blown out, interiors exposed.

At one point, an explosion shattered the windows of his apartment and knocked over his massive speaker system. The shockwave scraped newly renovated walls. “I just stopped doing renovations,” he says. “You never know when the next hit will come.”

We continue the conversation over dinner at a small neighborhood restaurant nearby.

I ask what he believes motivates the targeting of civilian buildings.

“They want to terrorize,” he says. “To push mental health lower and lower. Every Ukrainian is finding a way to survive this—some go to the front, some stay and work and donate and help. But living constantly in danger wears you down.

“They are waiting for people to say: we don’t want this anymore.”

When I ask how he imagines the war ending in a way he could accept, he pauses.

“I don’t know any strategy,” he says. “Every war is a failure. But there is no option to just give up. To leave cities where I grew up. Crimea, where I spent years. Donetsk, where I made murals. All of those places matter.”

I mention that Russian propaganda claims that people in Donbas were persecuted, that invasion was necessary to protect them. Andrey shakes his head.

“I had many friends there. I worked there. We collaborated on art projects before the war. All these narratives are just messed up.”

A few weeks after my visit, Andrey texts me a photo of the building where we met—another missile strike. He tells me he spent the night in a bomb shelter at home. A few days “fell out of life,” he says. The studio was repaired in time for his next photo session.

Day 9: Kyiv

Inside Irpin

Occupation, survival, and moral clarity

We sit in a small Irpin café next to a building ravaged by Russian attacks during the early weeks of the 2022 invasion. Zoriana Sidorenko points out windows and building facades that were hit, some still carrying small remnants of the intrusion. She and her husband Ivan have lived in that building for eight years after fleeing the Russian invasion of Donetsk in 2014.

It’s reasonable to mark 2022 as the date of the invasion, but this is ancient political territory. Zoriana was bullied by Russians when she protested during the 2013–14 EuroMaidan demonstrations. After Ukrainians told Russia-controlled oligarchs and authoritarians to fuck off during months-long protests in the freezing Ukrainian winter in Kyiv’s main square—and around the country—Putin began his invasion of Crimea and the eastern provinces through phony referenda and “people’s republic” militias.

Zoriana and Ivan had a successful restaurant business back home. She cannot return now; she would face certain persecution due to her political profile and her work as a psychologist helping war-trauma and sexual-violence victims.

A Long Memory of Domination

Domination and aggression. After centuries of subjugation under the Russian empire—dating back to Tsar Peter’s defeat of the Swedish army at Poltava in 1709—Ukrainians have endured repeated cycles of control and repression. Nestor Makhno briefly created the world’s first anarchist territory after World War I. Then the Bolsheviks invaded and forced the creation of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic as a satellite of Moscow. Stalin starved millions and slaughtered Kyiv’s liberal intelligentsia during the Holomodor in the 1930s.

It’s a long history.

Ukrainians are insisting it ends.

The tales of horror and war crimes here—and in nearby Bucha, which I will visit later in the week—are offset by a fierce determination to rebuild and repair. While Zoriana and her teenage friend and interpreter, Sofia, point out scenes of devastation, another pattern stands out. The town hums with normal daily life. Entire neighborhoods that were once killing fields and mortared dead zones now look like an ordinary U.S. suburb.

After a much-needed bathroom break following a long drive from central Kyiv—and an earlier visit to the Romaniv Bridge—Zoriana, a certified clinical psychologist, begins describing her work with Ukrainian soldiers and civilians who have experienced torture, sexual violence, imprisonment, and displacement. For the past two years, much of her work has focused on people freed from Russian captivity and civilians emerging from newly liberated territories. She also works under contract with the Ukrainian Attorney General's office, helping document war crimes and support survivors in active or formerly occupied zones.

Her work is not office-based. She travels to places where the damage is recent and unresolved.

"It Started."

Zoriana and her family lived about six kilometers from Hostomel Airport, which became one of Russia's primary entry points for the assault on Kyiv. We pass by the facility and try to enter, but it is understandably restricted.

On the morning of February 24, 2022, she hears her husband answer a phone call.

"It started."

Almost immediately afterward, she hears the first explosions. From their apartment windows, they watch toward the airport as Russian aircraft begin bombing.

The invasion is not abstract or distant. It is audible, visible, physical.

It had taken them years to rebuild stability after their displacement from Donetsk—new work, a new apartment, a sense of normal life after COVID.

When the full-scale invasion begins, it feels like the floor drops out again just as they had regained their footing.

She describes feeling intense anger rather than panic.

She moves into action. She withdraws cash, anticipating that banks and electronic systems might fail. She goes to pharmacies to buy medical supplies—syringes, medication. She buys flour, bread, and basic food staples. From a psychological perspective, she explains, this kind of action stabilizes the nervous system. Movement prevents paralysis. Having tasks creates a sense of control when circumstances are uncontrollable.

That first night, her family sleeps in the bathroom, away from windows. The shelling is heavy enough that you can feel the blasts on your skin.

When the nearby Romaniv Bridge is destroyed, evacuation routes become uncertain. They move to the basement of a nearby church—a church I later visit with my three hosts.

Forty-two people shelter there: mostly women, children, and elderly residents. Only three men are physically capable of defending the group if necessary. Their only weapons are three axes they manage to find.

Zoriana is the only person in the basement with medical and psychological training.

Without formal planning or assignment, she steps into an organizing role. People need structure. Someone manages ventilation so fresh air can circulate—she points out the air hole during our visit. She also shows us the two artillery impact sites in the church; the Russians likely knew it had been sheltering vulnerable civilians. Someone cleans floors. Another supervises children when parents are overwhelmed. People rotate tasks.

They remain in that basement for ten days.

She is surprisingly calm during that period—not because fear is absent, but because she is constantly engaged in useful work. Purpose regulates anxiety.

When it is safe to briefly leave the basement during daylight hours, they take turns returning to their homes to feed pets, cook on gas stoves, and

wash quickly. While home, they turn the television volume high so their young child does not hear outside explosions.

As the occupation intensifies, internet and electricity are cut. Roads become unsafe. Information becomes scarce. A journey that normally takes hours stretches into days as locals no longer know which routes are safe or occupied.

Why Resist

I ask her the same question I ask in each of my encounters: why do Ukrainians continue to resist, despite enormous loss and pressure from some outside voices calling for territorial concessions or negotiated surrender?

Her answer is personal rather than ideological.

She is originally from Donetsk. Much of her family history and identity remain tied to that region, which has been occupied for years. She is unable to properly bury her grandparents and her father because of the occupation. Her mother recently suffers a stroke and remains in occupied territory without adequate access to medical care. Zoriana cannot visit her.

Her adult years—from her mid-twenties onward—unfold under conditions of war and displacement. The idea that external powers might simply decide that entire regions of Ukraine no longer belong to Ukrainians feels like erasure of home, memory, and dignity.

“If land is given away,” she asks, “how do displaced people ever return home?”

For people forced from their regions, she says, there is a kind of homelessness that is not visible on maps. They no longer fully belong where they came from—and not fully where they live now. They exist in between.

I also ask how she processes, as a psychologist, the reality that Russian soldiers—people who once shared language, proximity, and cultural familiarity—could commit such violence.

Part of what disturbs her most is the contrast between modern values and the brutality of war. Children are taught emotional awareness, conflict resolution, responsibility, and environmental care—yet large-scale violence

continues in real time. There is a deep cognitive dissonance between contemporary ideals and historical cruelty.

I tell her I see similar dissonance in my home country, the United States—both domestically and internationally. Insistent claims of Christian devotion and constitutional justice coexist with enthusiasm for violence against Vietnamese, Iraqis, Nicaraguans, and even its own citizens.

She has also observed what she describes as an escalation of rage.

Early in the invasion, many Russian soldiers appear confused. Some believe they are entering Ukraine as liberators. Instead, they encounter organized resistance. Bridges are destroyed. Roads blocked. Progress slows. Frustration accumulates. As troops push through multiple defended towns before reaching places like Irpin, anger intensifies. Violence becomes less targeted and more indiscriminate—detentions, beatings, torture, killings.

She believes aggression compounds as units move across territory and absorb repeated resistance and loss.

I mention published work documenting how white nationalist militia members in the U.S. are often frustrated veterans of foreign wars who expected to be welcomed as liberators and instead returned defeated and alienated.

Through her professional work, Zoriana encounters civilians detained arbitrarily, beaten, and tortured in basements and improvised facilities. Some survivors describe being transported in extremely inhumane conditions, including confinement in industrial refrigeration units during transfers. These accounts come directly from people she supports after their release.

Occupation, she says, is not only military control. It is psychological domination—unpredictability, humiliation, and terror used as instruments of power.

Despite everything she has witnessed, she does not speak primarily from hatred. She speaks from clarity and responsibility. Her work focuses on stabilizing traumatized nervous systems, documenting crimes so they cannot be erased, and helping survivors reclaim agency over their lives.

Before we leave the restaurant, she gestures toward the surrounding streets and buildings.

“Almost everything here has a story.”

Sofia moved here with her Ukrainian parents from Tampa, Florida, eight years ago. She is 15—not a professionally trained interpreter—but she contributed massively to the afternoon with her personal testimony, her command of English, and her perspective as a young teenager. The day has the feeling of a family outing: warm and sometimes funny moments, peppered with moments of grief and processing.

An early stop is the car cemetery near the destroyed Romaniv Bridge leading into Irpin. The scene has a surreal edge. The parking lot is used both for driving-school lessons and as a hangout for teenage skateboarders. Zoriana shares stories, with Sofia interpreting and adding her own comments. There is an eerie physicality to the piles of dead, burnt-out cars. Most—though not all—were unoccupied when targeted by Russian weapons. Zoriana explains that many more were found in the forest as residents attempted to flee the destruction. Corpses were charred beyond recognition.

“02.05.2022” announces a memorial display, along with QR codes inviting visitors to review the history of the assault.

Ivan looks on, contributing occasionally, monitoring his wife’s anguish—a solid, quiet support. Sofia pauses frequently, knowing she’s not an expert in the art of interpreting, making careful efforts to get the words right. I will post the original videos in Substack Notes so Ukrainian speakers can track the original language and others can get a sense of the exchanges.

After explaining how Ukrainian armed forces destroyed the bridge to stop the advance of Russian tanks, Zoriana shows photos and videos of the surrounding destruction on her phone. She bears witness. The details matter deeply to her—perhaps the first time she has shared them with a non-Ukrainian.

What impresses me through our hours-long tour of the city is the speed and determination with which things are rebuilt. Right next to the exploded bridge is a new one. Individuals, businesses, and government entities

quickly restore broken buildings, roads, schools, and facilities. I ask my traveling partners to explain. They describe it as a political act: no fear, no submission, no surrender to despair. Unity, solidarity, hard work, sacrifice—and a struggle to reclaim normality.

Romaniv Bridge: The Funnel of Escape

A Ukrainian contact suggested I meet Zoriana because “she knows a lot about the darkest side of war atrocities.”

She describes this zone as a chaotic funnel of fear and uncertainty. People hid beneath the bridge while explosions echoed overhead. Some escaped. Many did not.

“People were moving without knowing if the road ahead was safe,” she explains.
“Information disappeared. You could not tell where soldiers were or where fighting was happening.”

As we talk, traffic whizzes by—deliveries, kids heading to school, mundane errands, oil changes. Irpin life feels extravagant in its normalcy.

The Sniper Intersection

We drive to a busy intersection notorious for some of the worst civilian violence in Irpin. We get out of the car and walk to the corner where the incidents are pointed out.

Sofia gestures toward a damaged building and the surrounding street. Neighbors were killed here, she explains, shot by snipers as they tried to evacuate. She laughs nervously—not from humor, but from strain.

“A lot of people were killed here,” she says. “This is where a woman who lived nearby watched a video of people who were killed at this intersection. She recognized her boyfriend’s shoe. That’s how she knew he died.”

Zoriana points toward the home of a friend. When word spread that civilians could cross the Romaniv Bridge, people began leaving their houses. Russian soldiers ordered everyone to come out dressed in white. Many wrapped themselves in white bedsheets.

Men deliberately separated themselves from women and children, walking on the opposite side of the street as they marched in white toward the Romaniv Bridge, because they were more likely to be shot.

Sofia shares stories from her neighborhood.

“Men who stayed behind to protect their women and children were often killed,” she says. “The boyfriend with the shoe—he was delivering medication to people in need in this area.”

Zoriana explains that everyone evacuating moved under gunpoint.

“When you go to Bucha, you will pass the train station. People were also evacuating to the Romaniv Bridge. They stepped over the dead bodies on the rails.”

There are no reliable statistics on how many people were killed at this intersection. Some bodies were later crushed by tanks moving through the area, making accurate counts impossible. Across Irpin, Ukrainian authorities estimate that roughly seventy percent of the town was damaged or destroyed during the occupation.

Residential Damage: “The Titanic”

We drive through residential neighborhoods that sustained heavy damage.

Sofia describes living next to a large apartment complex containing a high-rise building residents nicknamed “The Titanic” after a rocket tore through multiple floors, leaving a visible hole in the structure. For a long time it remained partially destroyed. Repairs took nearly two years and may still be ongoing. She relates the story with a casualness akin to recounting a funny incident at high school—experiences no teenager should have.

Nearby buildings show shattered windows, scarred facades, and patched repairs that reveal how blast pressure traveled through frames and walls. Some buildings remain visibly damaged or abandoned. The result is a patchwork landscape where ordinary daily life overlays unresolved trauma.

Zoriana says, “Some people came back quickly. Others never returned.”

Civic Life Under Fire

Inside the ruins of Irpin's cultural center, Zoriana relates stories from Kherson, the southern port city Russia tried—and failed—to occupy. It's the one city Ukrainian contacts insisted I avoid, even though it is now liberated and accessible.

In Kherson, Zoriana explains, Russian forces occupied a school and organized a torture center in its basement. She pauses as the weight of the anecdotes pulls up unwelcome memories and buried feelings. Part of her work is the documentation of war crimes—listening, recording, returning again and again to places where violence was systematized.

We move through the bombed-out cultural center, walking room to room through hollowed spaces. I feel like an interloper, aware of how much these rooms mean to the two women beside me. Zoriana points to one area where her daughter once watched cartoons. Another space where Sofia danced.

These were not marginal buildings. They were gathering places—centers of civic and cultural life—and their destruction represents not only physical damage but the deliberate disruption of community rhythm and continuity.

As we talk, the conversation drifts to the on-again, off-again Trump–Putin negotiations. Zoriana bristles at the suggestion that entire regions might simply be "given away."

"They say, 'these territories are not yours anymore, you cannot go home,'" she says.
"It's absurd."

When friends in Donetsk began going missing on their way to work or home, when she herself was detained for speaking out, she and her husband Ivan left. Still, she holds onto the belief that those territories will be freed.

Despite the damage, the building is beautiful. Its intent is still visible—the architecture, the eclectic layout, the surviving fragments of artistry and construction—even after being hit by the full force of Russian artillery.

Walking through the ruins with Zoriana, there is a surreal sense of moving between times. She speaks in a clinical, documentary register, then stops short as the emotional and psychological weight catches up to her. As the three recount personal experiences—that corner where neighbors were

shot, that street bombed, that building destroyed—the scale of what they've endured becomes legible.

In Kherson, she says, people shared similar stories. Russian forces bombed schools, daycares, and cultural centers.

"They were killing anyone they could see."

She shows me photos and videos on her phone.

In several occupied towns, she explains, civic spaces were repurposed as detention and interrogation sites—schools, basements, storage facilities, abandoned buildings. People were taken without warning, sometimes while walking to the store or checking on neighbors.

Later, we walk through a nearby park—a pause between scenes of violence. An older man in sunglasses smiles at us from a bench. He wears a short-sleeved purple shirt with large block letters:

I JUST WANNA MAKE MY ANCESTORS PROUD.

Zoriana says it's important to understand the difference between the occupation of Donetsk and the occupation of the Kyiv region.

In Donetsk, she explains, Russian forces arrived, terrorized the population for weeks, and killed those who actively opposed them. Then they briefly pulled back to allow people to flee.

"They had lists. They had directions."

People were taken from the streets, put into holes in the ground, beaten, tortured, and killed.

Occupation, as she describes it, is not only about territorial control. It is about breaking civic life—dismantling the spaces where people gather, create, and care for one another—and replacing them with fear, unpredictability, and silence.

The Church Basement

Later, we stop at a church where civilians sheltered during the invasion.

Two rockets struck nearby. One impacted the ground outside. Another penetrated the roof and landed inside near the altar. At the time of the strikes, many people were hiding in the basement. Cracks and blast damage remain visible.

Forty-two civilians sheltered here: mostly women, children, and elderly residents. Only three men were physically capable of defending the group. Their only weapons were three axes they managed to find.

Ventilation was carefully managed to keep air circulating. Floors were cleaned. Children were supervised when parents became overwhelmed. People rotated tasks.

“Organization kept people calm,” Zoriana had explained earlier. “When everyone has a role, panic does not take over.”

How Violence Escalated

Early in the invasion, many soldiers appeared confused. Some reportedly believed they were entering Ukraine as liberators. Instead, they encountered organized resistance. Bridges were destroyed. Roads blocked. Progress slowed. Frustration accumulated.

As units pushed through multiple defended towns before reaching areas like Irpin, anger intensified. Violence became less targeted and more indiscriminate—detentions, beatings, torture, executions.

“Rage builds as they move,” Zoriana explains. “Each failure makes the next place more dangerous.”

What the City Holds

Irpin today continues to rebuild. Cafés are open. Streets function. Children walk to school. Ordinary life moves forward.

And yet the town still holds memory: evacuation corridors, sniper lines, shattered homes, repurposed basements, damaged civic spaces, improvised shelters.

Every block contains layered stories of fear, improvisation, courage, survival, and loss.

Grief Therapy, Shock, and National Recovery

Samudro Prem describes himself as an *awakening psychotherapist*—a facilitator of intensive personal-development seminars that integrate psychology, somatics, and spirituality. Prior to our meeting, he had just completed a nine-day Grief and Bereavement Therapy training in Lviv. Before beginning his next workshop, we met for dinner in the Kyiv housing and retail complex where he was staying.

Two weeks later, that building was bombed in a Russian attack—just ten hours after Samudro and his wife had departed for Warsaw.

Special thanks to Elena Chebotayeva for the introduction. One of the many Ukrainians who made my cross-country journey both productive and warmly received, Elena is a psychotherapist who "still believes in humanity and promotes the idea that evolution works best when the brain, body, and soul are finally on speaking terms." She met Samudro through their shared engagement with the teachings of Osho.

I asked Samudro why he conducts grief-therapy workshops during wartime—and what he believes Ukraine faces emotionally as a nation.

Samudro Prem: It began with an intuitive feeling. While visiting friends in Bucha, I met a high-ranking military officer who had established a retreat center. He had no psychological training, but he tried to support soldiers returning from the front simply by listening to them. I felt *he* needed support.

For many years, I've taught grief therapy. So in the summer of 2022, shortly after the invasion, we returned to Lviv and held a three-day workshop called *The New Reality*. It focused on the first stage of grief: shock**.**

When tragedy strikes—COVID followed by war—our initial reaction is disbelief. Logically, we may have anticipated it, but emotionally it's overwhelming. Shock creates a dam. Emotions freeze. Life continues—people go to work—but internally they feel numb.

"Even after three and a half years, I believe much of Ukraine is still in shock, unable to process the full weight of emotion."

One woman who attended the workshop had lost her son in Bucha. At first, she lived in disbelief. When she finally saw his body, she entered profound sadness. She later shared that the seminar helped her regain clarity—as if

she were beginning life again. She reached what I call the seventh stage of grief: *acceptance*.

She feels her son's spirit and remains connected to him. Whether or not this is scientifically provable is less important than the fact that it comforts her and allows her to live with gratitude.

Brian: She said she felt an even deeper connection to her son now.

Samudro Prem: Yes. Her connection is more profound than when he was alive. Of course, grief doesn't disappear. There are days of sadness, even depression. Grief is not linear—it moves in cycles.

The stages begin with shock, then sadness as awareness deepens. The intensity depends on the emotional bond. A mother losing a son is among the most powerful losses. For me, the death of my spiritual master was more difficult than losing my parents, because of the depth of my devotion.

We also hosted retreats at the Bucha center itself. The couple running it had fled Donetsk and later purchased property in Bucha. They offered the space freely. It felt safe, peaceful—an ideal environment for this work.

Another critical stage of grief is anger. People often resist it, but I tell them it's natural. You can feel pride in a son defending his country and also anger at him for risking his life. You can feel anger toward a husband, a parent—anyone you've lost.

Guilt is another expression of anger, often directed inward.

To process these emotions, we use breathwork, crying, screaming, even hitting pillows. Emotional release restores balance.

Grief as a National Process

Brian: In your workshops, you suggest that grief isn't only individual—that Ukraine itself must grieve collectively.

Samudro Prem: Exactly. The process loops. Many people reach depression and feel stuck, especially because the war continues. There is no political resolution yet, no clear end.

But collective grief will eventually require national healing. Perhaps in ten years—when refugees return and the country feels whole again—Ukraine

will redefine its identity fully as European, not Soviet. Six million people have left, but many want to return. Their return could spark renewal.

“This grief will one day become the ground from which renewal grows.”

Brian : When I asked Ukrainians about peace, I was struck by their honesty. No slogans. No bravado. They admitted they didn’t know the path forward.

Samudro Prem: Yes. Perhaps because America hasn’t experienced war on its own land. Europe has—again and again. Ukrainians know devastation firsthand. They hope for healing, but the future is uncertain. Still, many believe deeply in rebuilding.

I’ve met Ukrainians abroad who still think in a Soviet framework. Inside Ukraine, though, identity is shifting decisively toward Europe.

Brian: It reminded me of interviews I conducted in Belgrade, where older people still felt nostalgia for Tito’s Yugoslavia. Material scarcity aside, they had housing, healthcare, stability. That sense of security lingers.

Samudro Prem: Yes. Before the war, nostalgia for communism was growing in Russia. For many, the 1990s were traumatic—chaos, insecurity, humiliation. Some preferred the old system, flawed as it was, because it felt stable.

Ukraine, however, is charting a new course—shaped by grief, but also by resilience and hope.

Day 10: Kyiv

The Ants of Kyiv

The building used to serve pizza.
Now it serves a war.

Metal racks rise against the walls. An industrial mixer churns dough in steady rotation. Long stainless tables are dusted with flour. Volunteers—mostly older women in kerchiefs, some younger, a few guys—work in quiet coordination, rolling, cutting, stacking, sealing. Laughter, camaraderie, focus.

Blue-and-yellow flags hang on the wall, some with scrawled inscriptions.

I'm at the production facility for Murashky (translation: ants).

I walk through the kitchen with its founders, Kostyantyn and Oksana Ovcharenko, and my interpreter, Vasylyna Shvets—a young woman who volunteered to interpret all my Kyiv interviews after a Telegram outreach through a Ukrainian contact. In a country under bombardment, generosity arrives quickly, without ceremony.

Murashky was founded on February 25, 2022—the day after the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion.

"When the war started," Kostyantyn tells me, "we did not have the idea that this center would exist. But we understood we had to do everything possible to help the country."

At first they prepared food in small quantities. Then demand expanded rapidly. Soldiers needed durable, lightweight, long-lasting meals.

Now Murashky produces 30,000 portions per month.

Engineering Survival

They prepare *galety*—hardtack-style biscuits—and dry rations designed for combat conditions.

“In combat positions,” Kostyantyn explains, “there is no possibility to cook.”

Each ration requires only boiling water. After seven to ten minutes, a meal forms: potato, peas, mushrooms, meat powders, spices. Powdered milk. Dried apples. Dates. Nuts. Beef jerky is sent to snipers, who operate in especially harsh conditions.

He opens plastic containers one by one during an impromptu tour of the basement storage area—dried vegetables, pea powder, spices, fruit. Everything labeled. Everything dated. Each box marked with portion numbers. It’s a remarkable, carefully-structured operation.

Food production is only part of the story.

When the food system stabilized, they studied how to assemble FPV drones. After opening boxes of food ingredients and packaging, he opens one filled with drone parts. It seems incongruous that small mechanical devices assembled here next to soup packets can confound the supposedly grand Russian army.

Murashky is also a logistical hub.

“We try to create a base,” he says, “that helps other organizations—governmental and non-governmental—support Ukraine more effectively. We help small organizations pass legal processes for crossing borders. We help reduce their expenses. We assist with vehicles, animal shelters, medical support.”

The building is a former pizza joint.

Why “Ants”?

“From the beginning,” Kostyantyn says, “we understood that alone we could not do much. We needed to unite. To collaborate with many people. Like ants.”

Ants are organized. Each knows its role. Each small effort builds a collective structure larger than itself.

“Everyone knows what to do,” he says. “Everything is structured.”

The first half of the day is baking and production. The second half is packaging and volunteer training. The atmosphere is industrious but

relaxed. People seem to like what they are doing—and who they are doing it with.

Having once managed a large restaurant in Los Angeles, I recognize the discipline. Food production at scale demands obsession with detail, testing, tinkering, and refinement.

Kostyantyn seems to inhabit that operational instinct naturally.

There is patriotic pride in the work, along with the tough satisfaction of getting it right.

Marriage Under War

I ask a question that I ask all married couples I meet in Ukraine: how has the war changed their family life?

Oksana answers quietly, her stoic expression offsetting her colorful orange T-shirt: *SMILE is the prettiest thing you can do.*

“Our life has really changed. We sleep less. We communicate less with our children. We do not even have enough time to notice that they are growing.”

They notice growth when clothes need replacing.

Before the war, she says, she had a house and a garden in the Luhansk region. Her days revolved around home and children. Their house is now under occupation. Their parents remain under occupation.

The children communicate with grandparents only online. The younger daughter sees her grandmother as a picture and does not fully understand she is real.

War fractures families in ways no map shows.

Despite this, Kostyantyn is resolute.

“We must continue,” he says. “It depends on us—our future and the rebuilding of our country.”

Why Resist?

I ask what motivates them to continue supporting resistance when many argue that peace should come with the acceptance of Russian positions.

The answer is immediate and familiar.

“We want to see our children in a country without war,” he says. “What we are building now is not for today. It is for future generations.”

He adds, “If Russia occupies Ukraine, I am not sure I will be alive.”

He and Oksana grew up in the Soviet Union. They understand that system from experience. She believes Russian control would bring back a similar system of repression.

“They will continue the war,” he says, “but with Ukrainians inside their forces.”

I ask what democracy means to him.

“Democracy is freedom of truth. You can choose what you want. You can do what you want—but with respect for the people around you.”

When I ask about the pathway to peace, his answer is firm:

“The pathway to peace is the failure of Russia. Imperial narratives must end. Even a ceasefire will not change the situation if those narratives remain.”

They were told Ukraine would fall in three days.

“It has been three years,” he says. “We will fight as long as we have strength.”

Anna of Kharkiv

At a production table, Anna cuts and stacks crackers with precise movements.

She is from Kharkiv. I ask her to come outside for a chat on the balcony.

“At the start of the full invasion,” she tells me, “I spent nine days in the subway.”

Nine days underground changed her understanding of safety.

She and her family fled west in three cars, driving five days without knowing their destination. In every town, strangers offered help.

“When I came to Kyiv,” she says, “I understood I had energy to do something.”

She is afraid to go to war. So she volunteers. She bakes. She designs merchandise as an illustrator and donates the proceeds to the army. She volunteers as a designer for Murashky.

“I do what I can.”

Language and the Myth of Protection

Kharkiv is a predominantly Russian-speaking city near the Russian border.

I ask whether she ever felt Russian speakers were persecuted—the justification Russia used for intervention.

She shakes her head.

“All my subjects in school—math, chemistry, history—were in Russian. Ukrainian language was only a few hours per week.”

She speaks Russian. Everyone around her spoke Russian.

“If anything,” she says, “sometimes Ukrainian speakers were pressed.”

In 2014, during the Euromaidan protests, she stood in Kharkiv’s central square. Busloads of men in balaclavas arrived and attempted to raise Russian flags over administrative buildings.

“We were students,” she says. “We had no weapons. We stood with posters.”

They asked police if they would protect them. The police gave no answer.

“I was afraid Kharkiv would become like Donetsk or Crimea.”

Why Join the European Union?

I ask what joining the EU meant to her.

She answers carefully.

“I was afraid of authoritarianism. I have friends from Belarus. I saw what happens when one man stays in power again and again.”

For her, Europe symbolized legal structure—courts, laws, protection.

“I wanted to be protected by my government,” she says. It was not about visas or language policy.

“It was about rights. About not having businesses taken. About not being sent to jail for opinion. About journalists being able to speak.”

A Family at the Front

An older female volunteer offers to talk.

Her family is fully entangled in the war. Her brother is on the front line. Her son-in-law is on the front line. Her nephew defended Azovstal in Mariupol. He survived the siege but disappeared after the explosion at Olenivka prison. He is believed to have survived the blast, but his whereabouts are unknown.

His father—her brother—continues fighting. For her, volunteering is not abstract solidarity.

“Ukraine is fighting for independence,” she says. “We have been independent for centuries. We must be free from oppression.”

She references the Cossacks—free people defending their land.

“We follow their example.”

Beyond Food

Murashky solicits and utilizes foreign volunteers. One of them, Greg, introduced me to the group. Visitors are encouraged to share their Ukraine experiences abroad. The staff also helps organizations navigate bureaucratic processes to move aid across borders legally and efficiently.

“When soldiers feel support,” Kostyantyn says, “it gives them motivation to go further.”

He gives me a military patch from Kharkiv, describing the imagery of the insignia—a symbol of resistance from a front-line city. I tell him I’ll journey there in a few days, inserting the patch in my wallet, where it remains.

The University That Escaped Mariupol

A campus destroyed, a faculty scattered, and the rebuilding of a university in exile

Mariupol State University no longer exists in the city whose name it bears.

The Russian siege of Mariupol in the spring of 2022 reduced much of the port city to rubble. Residential neighborhoods, hospitals, schools, cultural institutions, and factories were bombed or shelled in relentless waves of artillery and air strikes. Among the most widely known atrocities of the siege was the destruction of the Mariupol Drama Theater, where hundreds of civilians had taken shelter. Satellite images later revealed that the word children had been written in large white letters outside the building in an attempt to warn aircraft that civilians were inside.

The theater was destroyed anyway.

Mariupol State University, one of the intellectual centers of southeastern Ukraine, was also caught in the devastation. Before the invasion it enrolled more than five thousand students and served as an academic hub for the region. Its faculty taught languages, international relations, journalism, political science, education, and technology to a student body drawn from across the Donbas and the Azov coast.

Today the university survives.

But it survives in exile.

After the destruction of Mariupol and the occupation of the city by Russian forces, the university’s faculty and administration evacuated what they could and slowly reassembled the institution in Kyiv. Professors and

students scattered across Ukraine and Europe before gradually reconnecting and rebuilding the university in the Ukrainian capital.

As with all my Ukraine interviews, I came to connect with university rector Mykola Trofymenko through a cascade of contacts. While gathering interviews for an Electric Memories life story project on Koh Phangan, I met German university administrator Oliver Janoschka, who introduced me to Dr. Svitlana Shytikova, EU Erasmus+ Program Office Coordinator in Ukraine, who in turn opened a wide range of doors for me.

“If you are interested in resilient education,” Svitlana suggested, “the rector of Mariupol State University will be the right person to talk to. He evacuated his team and students from Mariupol during the occupation.”

The campus of the Kyiv National University of Construction and Architecture houses the relocated Mariupol State University. A simple plaque at the entrance marks the presence of an institution that once stood hundreds of kilometers to the east.

Oksana Derevianko, Head of the Information and Public Relations Department, and lead specialist Maksym Kladitin greeted me outside the entrance and escorted me to the meeting space.

Inside, the building contains classrooms, offices, exhibition spaces, and meeting rooms. Students move through the corridors between lectures. Faculty members hold seminars. Posters advertise research projects and international exchanges.

It feels like an ordinary university building. And yet the walls carry the memory of a devastated city.

The Gathering

Mykola and Oksana organized a group of faculty members, administrators, and students in a conference room to speak with me about the university’s evacuation and rebirth.

They sat around a makeshift horseshoe-shaped table beneath a bright blue wall bearing the university’s emblem.

Among those present were:

• Olena Pedchenko, Head of the Department of English Philology and Applied Studies
• Vyacheslav Kudlay, Head of the Department of Information Activities
• Iryna Sikorska, Director of the Center for International Education
• Serhiy Pakhomenko, Associate Professor of Political Science and International Relations and wife Natalia
• Mykyta Horbashevskyi, Chair of the Mariupol University Student Council
• Alina Gubska, a graduate of the university
• Zoya Kravets, a current student

The conversation began with the earliest days of the invasion and the chaos that followed.

Communication inside Mariupol collapsed almost immediately.

Phones stopped working. Electricity disappeared. Internet connections vanished. Faculty members could no longer reach each other.

One administrator described the moment with blunt simplicity.

“There were no signs,” she said. “There was only chaos, uncertainty, fear.”

People scattered in every direction.

“Everyone was almost on their own,” she explained. “There were no connections. People escaped as they could.”

Some fled west across Ukraine. Others crossed into occupied territories and eventually reached Europe. Some left through Russia before finding their way to other countries. Others stayed in Mariupol, hoping the siege would end quickly.

For weeks the fate of colleagues remained unknown.

“We called everyone we could reach,” another faculty member said. “Where are you? Are you safe? What are you planning to do?”

Gradually, fragments of the academic community began reconnecting.

Saving the University

In the middle of the chaos, one decision proved crucial.

The rector managed to evacuate the institution’s servers and digital infrastructure.

“Our rector personally preserved the servers and the software systems of the university,” one administrator explained. “That was extremely important.”

The servers were temporarily relocated to another university in Lviv, allowing academic platforms and student records to remain operational even as the physical campus in Mariupol was destroyed.

For months the faculty assumed the war might end quickly.

“We thought maybe three months,” one professor recalled. “We were counting the days.”

But as the siege continued and Mariupol fell under Russian occupation, it became clear that returning soon might be impossible.

The university faced a stark choice.

Mourn the destruction of the institution—or rebuild it elsewhere.

One administrator described the turning point.

“When we received support to renovate this building in Kyiv, we understood that we must not only mourn our past,” she said. “We must create something new. We must have a future.”

European partners and Ukrainian authorities helped fund the renovation of the Kyiv facility. International academic partners offered exchanges, grants, and research collaborations.

Slowly the rebirthed university began to take shape.

Language and Identity

During the discussion, I asked about one of the most persistent narratives used by the Kremlin to justify the invasion—the claim that Russian-speaking Ukrainians needed protection from Kyiv.

The response from the faculty was immediate.

“We were Russian-speaking,” one professor said. “But we considered ourselves Ukrainian. This is something often misunderstood in the West. Eastern Ukrainian identity does not correlate with language competence.”

Many residents of eastern Ukraine speak Russian in daily life but identify strongly as Ukrainian citizens.

“This was the mistake of Mr. Putin,” he said. “He believed that if people speak Russian, they must be Russians. That is a completely false idea.”

Another faculty member offered a personal example.

“I defended my dissertation on Russian literature in 2019.”

Russian literature had long been taught as part of global cultural heritage.

“Until 2014 we studied Russian literature like world literature.”

The notion that Russian language or culture were under threat in Mariupol before the invasion was, in their view, entirely fabricated.

“There was no pressure against Russian-speaking people,” one professor said. “No such problem existed.”

Propaganda and Information Warfare

The conversation then shifted to the role of propaganda during the siege.

Even after electricity and communication networks collapsed, rumors and narratives continued circulating through word of mouth.

“Even when there was no electricity and no mobile connection,” one faculty member said, “propaganda continued. People repeated that Kyiv had fallen, that Ukraine no longer existed.”

Without reliable information sources, even educated individuals could begin doubting reality.

“If you are inside that information field,” she said, “you start to believe it.”

Russia’s disinformation campaigns have also had a profound impact internationally.

Pakhomenko argued that the roots of the conflict go deeper than propaganda alone.

According to him, Russian imperial thinking has remained remarkably consistent across centuries.

“The Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and today’s Russia share a common mentality,” he said.

An imperial mentality.

“In this worldview,” he explained, “countries like Ukraine, Georgia, Estonia, or Kazakhstan are not truly independent states. They are seen as historical lands of Russia.”

Communist ideology once masked that imperial instinct.

“When the Soviet Union collapsed, the ideology changed,” he said. “But the imperial mindset remained.”

Losses

At one point the conversation turned toward the human cost of the siege.

The university maintains a small memorial display honoring students and staff who were killed.

But the full scale of the loss remains unclear.

“We know that some students were killed,” one administrator said.

Many others simply disappeared.

“We still do not know the fate of more than two hundred of our students.”

Another professor described the story of one young student who left the dormitory early in the siege, believing another building might be safer.

“She went with a friend to another house,” the professor said.

Shortly after arriving there, she was killed.

“The dormitory itself was later destroyed as well,” the professor added quietly.

The Student Tour

After the meeting ended, several students offered me a wander around the building.

They led me through corridors lined with exhibition displays.

One exhibit honors writers and intellectuals from eastern Ukraine under the title “People of the Great Steppe.”

Tall banners describe poets, journalists, and cultural figures connected to the Donbas region.

The display carries an implicit message: the cultural life of eastern Ukraine did not disappear when its cities were occupied.

It travels with the people who preserve it.

Another room contains photographs of the original Mariupol campus—a warm stone building framed by trees along a quiet street.

Nearby, a glass case contains a miniature model of the Mariupol Drama Theater.

The building appears peaceful in the model. It was reduced to rubble during the siege.

Other displays contain university memorabilia salvaged or recreated after the evacuation—academic certificates, photographs, small symbolic gifts exchanged with international partners.

One exhibit describes a symbolic gift presented by the First Lady of Lithuania during the opening of a Mariupol University center in Vilnius.

The university has since opened additional centers in Lithuania and Poland, extending its academic network across Europe.

The Shelter Classroom

The students then led me downstairs.

At first the room looked like an ordinary classroom.

Rows of chairs. White walls. A projector.

But a sign near the door read:

Shelter.

When air raid sirens sound, students and faculty gather here.

“Sometimes we continue classes here,” one student explained.

Another added with a small shrug.

“At the beginning it felt strange to study like this,” she said. “Now it feels normal.”

War has a way of reshaping normal life. I felt a mixture of admiration and dread that these kids had to study in this environment. I’m a half century removed from my academic life but the lightness of spirit and lust for life felt familiar.

Nearby another room contained a backup generator—a practical necessity in a country where Russian missile strikes frequently target electrical infrastructure.

A Summer Lunch with Vyacheslav

Vyacheslav Kudlay invited me for a stroll down the street to Chernomorka, a neighborhood seafood bistro. It was a delightful summer afternoon for an unhurried outdoor lunch. We ate well.

He described how the university has changed since relocating to Kyiv. Before the invasion, Mariupol State University enrolled more than five thousand students. Today the number is just over two thousand. He suggests the institution has adopted a new mission.

“We want to become a civic university,” expanding the university’s traditional role. More than 50,000 Ukrainians across the country have enrolled in the free online English language training. The university also operates professional training programs for public servants and a new Veterans Business School designed to help returning soldiers transition into civilian careers.

Psychological trauma programs are integrated into teacher training. The university has also built partnerships with European institutions, allowing students to spend semesters studying abroad.

“Our students must be connected to Europe,” he said.

Meanwhile plans are underway to develop a larger campus in Kyiv—a long-term project that could eventually include preschool, school, and university education within one integrated educational complex.

Architecture students have already produced design proposals for the future campus.

A University Without a City

Despite these new initiatives, Mariupol remains central to the university’s identity.

Faculty members still speak of returning someday.

“When Mariupol is Ukrainian again,” one student told me, “we will reopen the university there.”

Until then the institution serves another role, a kind of ambassador for the city.

“We represent Mariupol now.”

Truth, War, and Marriage

Anastasia Rodenkova and Vladislav Varoponov are deeply engaged in Ukraine’s information front: she leads two influential independent media outlets, while he analyzes Ukraine’s relationship with the United States and the West. They share an office. They’re also married. Our conversation ranged from journalism and disinformation to something more personal—what it means to sustain love, work, and partnership during years of invasion and resistance.

Anastasia: I’m Anastasia Rodenkova, a journalist and media manager. I founded *Rubryka*, the first Ukrainian solutions-journalism outlet. I’m originally from Sloviansk in eastern Ukraine—one of the first towns occupied by Russia in 2014. Because of that personal connection, I also lead

Eastern Variant, the main independent media outlet for the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. So I oversee two outlets—one national, one local.

Now, I also head the Media Network Recovery Window, a coalition focused on reconstruction and rebuilding, made up of other local media outlets. We're based in Kyiv, and I'm very happy you're here, Brian.

Brian: Thank you. Vlad, your turn.

Vladislav: My name is Vladislav Varoponov—Vlad for short. I'm a political analyst, journalist, and editor. Two years ago, I founded a think tank specializing in American Studies in Ukraine—the only one that analyzes how U.S. policy and politics affect Ukraine.

Before that, I wrote analysis for Ukrainian and European audiences, and then decided to scale that expertise domestically. We launched the U.S.–Ukraine Media School to train over 100 Ukrainian journalists on how to cover U.S. elections and bilateral relations.

Since March 2025, I've been chief editor of two government-run media outlets—*The Gaze* and *New UA TV English*. I mostly edit articles now rather than write, but I enjoy it. It's important to provide deeper context to foreign audiences and explain how Ukraine connects with the West.

Anastasia: And because Brian focuses on stories of love, I should mention—we're husband and wife.

Brian: Ah, perfect segue. Is sustaining a relationship during wartime different from any other time?

Vladislav: Of course. In the first weeks and months of the full-scale invasion, everything was uncertain. We helped and relied on each other constantly, often working around the clock. It was exhausting, but that mutual support was essential.

Anastasia: Yes, after three years of nonstop invasion and constant pressure, meaningful relationships are what give you strength.

Brian: Ukraine once lived under a Soviet media system. How has journalism evolved since then?

Anastasia: It changed dramatically. We inherited propaganda-style media dominated by oligarch ownership—a toxic system. But after the Revolution of Dignity, many bold, young media startups emerged. People felt empowered to broadcast their own truth, and there was real demand for it.

My outlet *Rubryka* was founded in 2018 and built on solutions journalism—not only exposing problems but reporting on how people solve them. Even in wartime, that gives people a sense of agency. For example, when Kyiv's largest children's hospital was bombed last July, our reporters showed how ordinary citizens mobilized to help.

We cover not just attacks, but how communities rebuild and recover. That's the heart of our work.

Brian: How do you practice journalism in an age of disinformation and propaganda?

Anastasia: By building trust—the most important connection between media and audience. *Rubryka* gets over two million monthly views, with donors and community supporters. We show who we are behind the stories.

But it's very hard now. Independent media struggle with resources while fighting global disinformation and Russia's authoritarian propaganda.

Vladislav: I'd add that journalism in Ukraine carries a special meaning. Over the last twenty years, journalists have gained trust not just through their work, but through personal commitment to the country.

Think of Georgiy Gongadze, founder of *Ukrainska Pravda*, murdered for exposing corruption—his death nearly toppled a president. Journalists like Mustafa Nayyem helped ignite the 2013 Maidan protests. Many later became MPs or anti-corruption activists.

Today, Ukrainians don't need basic explanations. They want context, scenarios, and deep analysis—especially about foreign policy, since we rely heavily on our partners. Journalism now bridges Ukraine with the world.

Brian: When you visited the U.S., what did you think of Americans' understanding of the war?

Vladislav: There's always room to improve, but generally people we met understood what's right and wrong in this war. What's missing is more

personal contact—exchanges that humanize Ukrainians and reduce the time spent correcting misconceptions, like why we can't hold elections during war or why occupied territories can't be "traded."

Anastasia: Yes, and three years into full-scale invasion, war fatigue is real—abroad and at home. It's painful to see global attention fading. People ask for "solutions"—how will it end? But there are no easy recipes. We face a powerful enemy waging war on our existence.

We all want peace, we pray for peace—but we fear occupation even more. I'm from the Donetsk region; I know what it feels like when your hometown is taken, your family silenced. That's why any talk of "exchanging territories" is so painful. Ukrainians want victory—not out of vengeance, but because what's happening is profoundly unjust.

Brian: We talked a little about the evolution of Ukrainian media. You came from the eastern part of the country, now occupied by Russia. Can you share your personal insights on the difference between the environment for personal expression here in Kyiv versus Moscow or the occupied territories? For many people that might seem subtle, but I imagine for you it's an important distinction.

Anastasia: I want to share the story of my closest colleague from eastern Ukraine, from the media outlet I lead. She spent almost an entire month in Mariupol—from the start of the full-scale aggression until she managed to escape. It's a dramatic story. We completely lost contact because the Russians immediately create an information blockade. They want to control your cognitive space, so they cut internet, telephone—everything.

It's a miracle she's alive. As a journalist, she had to burn her press card and personal items. We deleted all mentions of her name from our website and social media, because she had to pass through a "filtration camp."

Brian: What is a filtration camp?

Anastasia: It's where they check your identity. If you're a journalist, they treat you like a soldier—an enemy. Especially if you're affiliated with Ukrainian media. Thanks to Reporters Without Borders, we helped her escape. During that time, she was hiding, spending days in a shelter with no communication. She desperately needed information. Russians spread lies that Kharkiv and Kyiv were already destroyed like Mariupol. When you can't

verify information, you start to believe it. That's what happens in occupied territories—they trap people in an alternate reality.

Brian: You said something intriguing—that for the Russian government, a journalist is as dangerous as a soldier. Why?

Anastasia: Russia weaponizes information. There are no objective media outlets in the occupied territories. You may know of Viktoria Roshchyna, a Ukrainian journalist who went to report there—she was tortured to death. That's why our team is now relocated; journalists are captured immediately if they enter occupied areas.

When you can't verify information, you start to believe it. That's what happens in occupied territories—they trap people in an alternate reality.

Vladislav: I'd add to Anastasia's point. During the 2014 aggression in eastern Ukraine and Crimea, Russia justified everything by claiming they were "helping." Any journalist who could show photos or videos of what Russians were actually doing—especially in filtration camps—would destroy their narrative.

It's crucial for us in Kyiv not to lose contact with occupied territories. The war is dynamic—every night, something changes. For example, my home city Mykolaiv was brutally attacked through the summer of 2022. Russians wanted to capture the south, but Mykolaiv stopped them after they took Kherson. My grandmother refused to leave, so I worried every day.

We must stay connected with people in threatened areas. Eventually the Ukrainian army will liberate these places, and we'll have to rebuild relationships with the same people. Staying in touch—sharing true information—is essential.

Brian: If you could speak directly to Americans, what do you want them to understand about Ukraine, this war, and Ukraine's role in resisting an autocratic power?

Anastasia: Ukraine is fighting for the ability to tell the truth. A strong civil society is our backbone. This war is not just for territory—it's for the right to live freely and speak truthfully.

Russians use propaganda to say we're defeated, to create psychological pressure, even in so-called liberal media. But despite how hard it is, our

spirit remains high. We fight with the world’s support, and we can’t afford to lose.

When government bodies try to control independent institutions, people protest. These are the values we fight for—a democratic, civilized country where independent media can speak without punishment.

Vladislav: My message to Americans is this: it’s not the time to turn away. This war is about all of us. It may seem far away, but it’s deeply connected to our shared values—freedom, dignity, truth.

The image of Western civilization, of what we all admire, is being tested in Ukraine. Ukrainians are among the most pro-American, courageous, hardworking, and creative people in Europe. We rely on American understanding and support. But it’s mutual—you need us, too. Because our fight for truth and freedom defines the world we all live in.

Day 11: Kyiv

A Journalist in Exile

Hromadske Radio's Viktoria Yermolaeva on fleeing Crimea and defending Ukraine's free press

I met Viktoria Yermolaeva at Паштет (Pashtet Café), a cozy Kyiv spot whose name—literally pâté or spread—captures the warmth and humor of the city's café culture. Known for traditional Ukrainian dishes and informal gatherings, its secluded second floor was a stylish, quiet place for a conversation.

Viktoria works with *Hromadske Radio*, one of Ukraine's leading independent nonprofit media outlets, producing news, interviews, and podcasts focused on politics, society, and the war.

Thanks to Roman Kifliuk for his introductions to Viktoria and numerous other Ukrainian media executives, journalists, and entrepreneurs. Roman is national advisor for Ukraine at IMS (International Media Support), a non-profit organization working to support journalists and media in countries affected by armed conflict, human insecurity, and political transition.

Viktoria: I'm the editor-in-chief of *Hromadske Radio*, an independent media outlet. I moved to Kyiv from Crimea in 2014, when Russia occupied my city. It was a very difficult decision, because I had to leave my home and my past behind. I left with a small suitcase and about 4,000 hryvnias (roughly US$95 at the time). It wasn't enough, but I knew I couldn't live under the Russian flag.

Brian: Was this right after the Russian takeover?

Viktoria: I was already in Kyiv during the 2013 Euromaidan protests. I was writing about what was happening there, and when I returned to Crimea, I was persecuted for my pro-Ukrainian activities. Russian forces and their local supporters were targeting journalists and activists. I received threats —messages saying, "We know where you live; we'll find you." They were shutting down independent media and trying to silence everyone with pro-Ukrainian views.

Brian: Did you experience direct danger?

Viktoria: Yes. When I called the local police, they didn't protect us. It was clear Russia had already prepared the ground—local officials, deputies, police—many were bribed or threatened to support the occupation. It became too risky to stay.

Brian: Was the persecution because you joined the Euromaidan movement or because you were a journalist?

Viktoria: Both. Russia's strategy was to remove pro-Ukrainian people and replace them with their own agents—people who looked like ordinary citizens but served Russian interests. The so-called "referendum" showing over 95% support for joining Russia was fake. Most Crimeans were passive; they stayed home, watched television, and waited to see what would happen.

Brian: What's your estimate—how many Crimeans supported or opposed the occupation?

Viktoria: Maybe 10% welcomed Russia, 30% opposed it, and 60% didn't care or didn't understand what the change would mean or were simply afraid.

Brian: Why does Russia target journalists and media first when occupying new areas?

Viktoria: Because independent media are a threat to control. The first thing Russia does is block radio and TV signals and replace them with Russian propaganda. That's what happened in Crimea, and the same now happens in occupied parts of Donetsk or Kherson.

"Free information is dangerous to authoritarian power."

Brian: What kind of journalism were you doing back then, and what do you do now?

Viktoria: In 2013–2014, I worked for an independent outlet in Kerch (Crimea). There was no censorship; I could report the truth and expose Russian propaganda. Now, as editor-in-chief, I lead a team that continues that mission—to provide independent, fact-based reporting even during war.

Brian: What did the Euromaidan (the 2013/ 2014 nationwide protests) mean to you personally?

Viktoria: I was 23. I was young and full of hope. The protests inspired me—professors, workers, students, people from every walk of life were standing together. It was a powerful and unique moment for Ukraine.

Brian: Some sociologists say that when people see others taking risks—especially young people—it motivates them to join. Was that your experience?

Viktoria: Yes. Seeing people's courage gave others courage. Euromaidan united Ukrainians in a way we'd never seen before.

Brian: Now, as a journalist and citizen, why do you continue to resist? Why is it so important for Ukraine to remain independent from Russia?

Viktoria: Because of everything we've lost. I lost friends, my home, and people tried to humiliate me for believing in Ukraine. Russia must be stopped. The pain and suffering of the last eleven years are indescribable. Even with little money, we keep our media alive, even near the front lines. We've saved lives—people listen to us for evacuation routes or safe roads. Independent media are not just information; they are protection.

Brian: How do you feel when world leaders, like Donald Trump or others, talk about giving away Ukrainian territory?

Viktoria: It feels like betrayal—a humiliation for all Ukrainians and Europeans who are fighting and dying for freedom. When Western leaders say "we don't need you," it's as if they erase our sacrifice.

Brian: Finally, what's the difference between life in Ukraine and life under Russian control—in Crimea or Moscow—especially regarding freedom and journalism?

Viktoria: In Ukraine, we are free to tell the truth, to protest, to criticize the government. There's no censorship. In Russia, the state destroys independent media, the Ukrainian language, and culture. They want to erase our identity. But we will not surrender.

A Bucha Survivor

Forty-Four Days of Torture in Russian Captivity

Sasha sits across from me on the outdoor patio of his Bucha home, relaxed, buoyant, as he begins to describe what happened to him during the Russian occupation.

For the next hour, with the help of interpreter Vasylyna Shvets, he shares the brutal details of his detention—a 44-day stretch of torture, of beatings, cold, and confinement with a composure that defies the intensity of his story.

In March 2022, Russian forces occupied Bucha, a suburb of Kyiv, where hundreds of civilians were killed during weeks of control before Ukrainian forces retook the area. The discoveries that followed—mass graves, execution sites—would come to define the brutality of the invasion's early days.

Elena Chebotayeva, Sasha's neighbor, had warned me in advance: he would insist that we stay for dinner.

I had already promised Alex, a Kyiv-based attorney who was driving Vasylyna and me around town that day, that we would leave early to beat the Friday rush hour traffic, with time to stop at the Babyn Yar memorial.

When the interview ended, I explained that we need to go.

Sasha pauses, then asks if we might stay for dinner.

I apologize and tell him we really don't have time. He nods, but the disappointment is visible—the first sign of anguish I've seen all afternoon.

Then, gently, he offers an alternative.

At least one drink.

We agree.

He disappears into the house and returns with a colossal sealed bottle of Jack Daniel's, clearly saved for a special occasion.

The first pour is generous. The second arrives quickly. By the third, I thank him and begin to rise, explaining again that we have to go.

He looks at us and asks if we might stay for dinner after all.

This time, the disappointment is palpable.

I glance at Alex and Vasylyna. They smile and nod.

Sasha brightens immediately.

He leads us through the house, showing us shelves of homemade pickles and bottles of his own concoctions, before returning us to the table, where the meal begins to take shape—sausages, herring, dried fruits, dishes arriving one after another.

Only later do I fully register the contrast: a man who can recount forty-four days of torture without raising his voice, yet shattered by the thought that a guest might leave his home unfed.

The food is excellent. We will be late.

But disrespecting Sasha is not in the cards.

The Interview

Brian: First of all, Sasha, tell me where we are right now. Help me understand this neighborhood and this area.

Sasha: We are in the Bucha region, in my village. When the Russian invasion began, their soldiers came into this area with tanks and military vehicles. Many people hid in basements and shelters. I was in a shelter at first, but I decided to leave.

When I came out, I met Russian soldiers. They even asked me for a cigarette. I asked them why they had come to Ukraine—why they had invaded.

They told me they had come to “set people free.” I asked them, “Free from what?” They had no answer.

Brian: You had a military background, correct? You served in the Soviet military?

Sasha: Yes. I served in the Soviet army. I was trained and prepared to go to Afghanistan, but in the end I never went there. Instead, I was stationed in Kazakhstan.

Brian: Did you tell the Russian soldiers that you had served in the Soviet military? Did that make any difference?

Sasha: Yes, I told them. They were pleased to hear it. I think that fact probably saved my life.

I am also comfortable speaking Russian, which helped me later when I was imprisoned. When prisoners spoke Ukrainian, guards often beat them with batons or used stun guns. Speaking Russian sometimes protected me.

Brian: Was it shocking or confusing for you to see Russian soldiers attacking your neighborhood, considering you once served in the same army?

Sasha: Yes, it was extremely shocking.

I have twenty-one relatives in Russia. My father had eight brothers and sisters, so our family is very large and spread across many cities. Before the invasion we were still communicating. Just a day or two before the invasion we spoke. I am openly pro-Ukrainian, but some of my relatives are not. My brothers say they are Russian—even though they were born in Ukraine, even though they have a Ukrainian surname. Still, they say they are Russian.

My grandfather was a soldier. He was also a prisoner of war. And he always told us: Russians are liars. You cannot trust them. When we watched war movies—especially films about Stalin—he would say, “This is all lies. It’s garbage. Don’t watch it.”

In Russia, they have Victory Day parades every year. My relatives take part in those parades. They carry photos of my grandfather as if he were part of their story. But this goes completely against his will—against everything he believed.

One of my brothers sent me a message calling me a fascist. Russian soldiers later saw that message when they searched my phone.

Brian: Your relatives in Russia—do they believe what happened to you?

Sasha: No. They do not believe that I was taken prisoner or tortured. Even after I returned and told them what happened, they refused to believe it. I sent them videos showing the destruction here in Ukraine. They still did not believe me.

This is the result of propaganda. The propaganda in Russia today may even be stronger than during the Soviet period.

There is a joke: if the government says something white is actually red, then people must say it is red.

Brian: Is the situation today under Putin similar to that Soviet mentality?

Sasha: Yes, the approach is very similar.

If the government says something is true, people must repeat it. But in my opinion the Soviet system was sometimes more sophisticated. Today many people are simply fooled by propaganda.

The Invasion

Brian: Tell me more about what it was like here when the invasion began.

Sasha: When Russian troops occupied the village, I tried to speak with them peacefully. Later, officers noticed what I was wearing. I had blue and yellow sports clothes with stripes like the Ukrainian flag. I also had a coat with a trident symbol—it had belonged to my father.

The soldiers ordered me to stop and demanded my phone. When they searched it, they saw the message from my brother calling me a fascist.

Because of that message, they arrested me.

They put me into an infantry fighting vehicle. We drove for four days. Prisoners were packed so tightly that we were like mattresses for each other inside the vehicle.

Eventually we were taken first to Belarus and then transported to Russia—to the Kursk region.

Brian: What were you thinking while this was happening?

Sasha: I was captured together with a man I knew. During the transport I said to the others: “Who knows? Maybe on May 9 they will parade us in Red Square for Victory Day.”

I believed I would become a prisoner of war.

I also think the Russian officers already knew about me. I helped build checkpoints in the village and tried to defend the area. I also participated in the Maidan protests.

One officer said the word “Maidan” when they arrested me. So they likely already knew who I was.

In Russian Captivity

“We were beaten for up to six hours a day.”

Brian: Tell me about your captivity in Russia.

Sasha: It was winter—about minus fifteen degrees.

There were about twenty-five tents where prisoners were held. Russian propaganda reporters were there filming everything for television. They even brought people who appeared to be from the Red Cross, but it was staged for propaganda.

We had to kneel on the snow for two hours. We could walk only on our hands and knees.

Later, after the interview, Sasha told me that he was chained outside in the snow, naked, for hours.

There was almost no food or water. We were not allowed to go to the toilet. Once they gave us food, but it was boiling hot and we were forced to eat quickly. It was impossible. Water was the biggest problem. I collected snow and brought it into the tent so we could melt it and drink it. Later there was no snow, so we broke icicles from the roof and melted those. It was impossible to take a shower because when the water was running, it was freezing instantly.

Eventually we were taken to a prison in the Kursk region. There it became a real nightmare. We were beaten for up to six hours a day. They beat us with

rubber batons, sticks, metal pipes, and stun guns. They put plastic bags over our heads so we could not breathe.

The youngest officers were the most brutal. Because I was older, they called me “Dad” or “Grandfather.”

Brian: Why do you think they treated prisoners this way?

Sasha: For Russia there are no rules. They believe Russia is the leader and all other countries must submit.

In prison we were forced to repeat propaganda. We had to say that America was the main enemy, that Ukraine was already under Russian control, and that President Zelensky was hiding in Poland.

We had to sing the Russian national anthem every fifteen minutes. We had to learn and sing foolish Russian songs.

They also used dogs against us. Guards let dogs bite the prisoners. Many men had swollen legs and wounds from the bites.

Brian: So the purpose was intimidation?

Sasha: Yes. Intimidation and domination. Russia sees Ukraine only as a part of Russia. And this is it. There is no other plot. Russia wants Ukrainians to feel that Ukraine is not a real country—that it belongs to Russia.

Prisoner Exchanges and Propaganda

Sasha: There were also prisoners from the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk. They were treated differently. They were given food and allowed to walk. They were told that if they returned to Ukraine, Ukrainian forces would shoot them in the knees.

Because of this propaganda, many of them chose to join the Russian army instead. This was part of a plan—Ukrainians fighting Ukrainians. Those who refused were beaten and imprisoned. If someone is beaten every day, fear makes him obey anything—even singing propaganda songs.

When we received news about the possible exchange, we had to stand two hours on our feet on the cold floor. I told my friends, the other prisoners, that if you stand for two hours, it means that you will not feel your feet, and it will be impossible to leave.

Brian: How has this experience changed you? What should Ukraine do now?

Sasha: Ukraine must continue fighting. Russia ultimately wants the whole country. In my view, the only real solution is the collapse of Russia or a change of leadership there. Until then, we have no choice but to resist.

Russian propaganda has deeply brainwashed many people. I studied in Kazakhstan and kept in touch with classmates. One of them is now a school director and posts photos with Russian symbols. She spreads pro-Russian propaganda to children.

Through the interview, Sasha's large, playful shepherd insisted on my attention, gleefully jumping, nuzzling, and lying close by.

Brian: Your dog just came up to greet us. Elena told me something about dogs during the invasion.

Sasha: Yes. Elena had a dog that normally barked at everything—thunder, noise, strangers. But when Russian soldiers came into the village, the dog became completely silent. It was as if the dog understood that the enemy was here; its behavior changed completely.

Brian: What would you want people outside Ukraine to understand about this war?

Sasha: We Ukrainians want nothing from Russia. We only want Russia to leave our country so that we can live freely. For Ukrainians who live abroad, the best way to help is to return home and help rebuild the country—to support Ukraine's future.

It's clear that for future centuries, Ukrainians will not forget or forgive, will not excuse all the massacres that the Russians have committed. People have been tortured and killed. They will not forget about all our cities that were destroyed. Russians are not our brothers. They are enemies. They are animals.

On our way out, Sasha takes us across the street to Elena's house, where neighbors sheltered during the brief Russian occupation. As with Igor, during a prior interview, who joined the army to ensure his town was never again brutalized, Sasha declared this was his neighborhood and the safety of his neighbors a matter of honor.

As we left Bucha, we passed buildings hit hard by Russian forces. As with Irpin, the community was rebuilding out of necessity, out of a sense of honor, out of defiance.

Babyn Yar

Memory, aftermath, and music as endurance

We left Bucha late Friday afternoon, carrying Sasha's story with us—the matter-of-fact recounting of occupation, brutality, and endurance.

As we drove back toward Kyiv, Alex pointed out sites along the way—buildings hit in the early days of the invasion, neighborhoods that had come under Russian assault. The city holds its damage in layers. Some visible. Some not.

Alex insisted we stop at Babyn Yar. I had heard of it, but did not know what to expect.

We had time before dinner—before meeting Alex's wife and young son, before my interview with blues musician Max Tavrichesky.

So we turned off the road and entered the trees.

The place does not announce itself. There is no single focal monument demanding attention.

Gravestones appear first.

Not in neat rows, but scattered, some half-sunken into the earth. Remnants of an old Jewish cemetery, fragments of a community life that existed here before the violence, before the ravine became synonymous with mass murder.

As Alex, my interpreter Vasylyna, and I walked among the memorials, a persistent voice came through the trees. I thought nothing of it. Gradually, I realized it was following us.

Then it registered. The voice was reciting names.

Names of the dead, one after another, through discrete speakers placed throughout the grounds. There is no beginning and no end.

Each name is given its voice. Its dignity. A brief return to the air.

Babyn Yar is a deep, steep-sided ravine whose natural contours—narrow entry points, sloping walls, and a wide basin—made it possible to concentrate, shoot, and bury large numbers of people in a single location.

On September 29–30, 1941, German SS units, supported by police and local collaborators, carried out a mass execution, killing 33,771 Kyiv Jews. Victims were ordered to assemble, marched to the ravine, forced to undress, and driven in groups to the edge or floor, where they were shot in successive waves, their bodies falling into the ravine.

The executions continued for two years. Victims included Jews, Roma, Soviet prisoners of war, psychiatric patients, and other civilians. Historians estimate the total killed here to be between 70,000 and 100,000.

Only after Ukrainian independence did a sustained effort begin to properly memorialize what happened here.

At the far end stands what a marker calls *“a place for reflection: a symbolic synagogue.”*

The walls are alive with color: deep reds, blues, and golds, hand-painted with animals, flowers, and script. Hebrew prayers cover the surfaces, written as if still being spoken aloud.

After the austerity of the grounds, the synagogue feels almost disorienting, restorative in its beauty. My childhood friend Evan Shatz tells me his family is originally from Ukraine. My cousin Don Shapiro claims similar ancestry from one side. I ask for names and say Kaddish before leaving.

Max Sings the Blues

We left Babyn Yar in near silence. A short time later, we would be in Gonzo Craft Beer, music playing, drinks flowing, a different kind of gathering. Kyiv holds both at once—memory and motion, grief and life continuing. We meet up with that night’s performer, Max Tavrichesky. I warn him I may take the stage with him for a song. He insists on it. We record a video chat outside the club, backdropped by bombed-out buildings. Our conversation is punctuated by air raid sirens, ignored by Max, who performs and creates as an act of resistance.

Inside, he puts on a one-man show. Alex brings wife Natalia and their spectacularly cute young son. The kid has a ball, out with well-lubricated grownups. These days, Natalia declares, a Kyiv

mother doesn't get out to concerts much. The family is having a grand time. Vasylyna, the young woman who came along as interpreter, joins us. During a break, Max hands me his guitar, and I perform Lead Belly's version of "Midnight Special." Max joins in on his harmonica.

Here's our conversation outside Gonzo.

Brian Gruber: Max, how did you get into the blues?

Max Tavrichesky: For me, blues came first on the road. I had never been a listener to the blues, never a collector. Already was collecting records when I was a teen, but never blues. But when I got older and hit the road, I understood that's the music for the road.

Brian: Who are your favorite artists and who and what are you going to perform tonight?

Max: I like a lot of blues artists, all the blues legends. I perform tributes to them. I can make a tribute to Little Walter, and same for Muddy Waters, same for Howlin' Wolf, same for Willie Dixon. But I also love, they call them small names, like Bubba Barnes, Peg Leg, like Charlie Sayles, like Lazy Lester. They've never been international stars, but I still love them.

Brian: Is there anything different in playing and performing or creating music during a period of wartime like this?

Max: For these three and a half years, actually from 2014, it became so routine to me that I don't even realize the difference. I could say the only difference, when you're doing it in wartime, you are more devoted to what you do for both listeners and soldiers. Every concert, we would try to raise money, some small money, some big money. It's not for fun only, yes, it's to unite people, to make them cool, to reload them.

Brian: In talking to other musicians and artists, I got the sense that for some it's a political act to go on with a sense of normalcy, to live your life and to create, even though the country is under attack.

Max: I'm just on my way, and I will do that until I die, no matter war or anything else.

Brian: You just came from Kherson. What's the scene there now?

Max: It's suffering. Half of the city is destroyed. And they keep on destroying it, just three kilometers distance from Russians across the river, so they reach the town with any weapon they want.

They intentionally target civilians. It's routine. While we're talking, there might be two or three civilians wounded by drones. Two to three hundred drones a day over Kherson, some of them are investigating or, when they're on low battery, the FPV drones hit anything they see that's closest. A car or a babushka, you know, old woman, or child or shop. They come inside of the shop, explore, exploding everything there.

It's just terror. Just terror. It's nothing to do with military action, just terror.

Brian: What's your hope for the future? What do you think is a good outcome or the right outcome for this war?

Max: It's hard to say because every day we are used to living like it's the last day, we don't know if tomorrow is happening. So, it's hard to say anything about the future. I know one thing now, there is a battle. It's not only the battle between Ukraine and Russia. It's a global battle between good and bad, between sane people and idiots. They're united, you know? And this kind of global thing makes the future darker. But I am taught by my music that there is always hope in every note, in every sound. I will do that even without electricity.

Earlier in the day, I had been speaking with a journalist about propaganda and truth. In the afternoon, I sat with a man who survived forty-four days of captivity. By evening, we walked Babyn Yar. And later, we were in a bar listening to blues.

A long day, one conversation at a time.

Day 12: Poltava

Scene of the 1709 Russian conquest of the Swedish army

We left Kyiv in the morning light, the city thinning into long roads and open sky, the effects of the night at Gonzo Craft Beer mostly metabolized. Alex drove, Natalia beside him. Their young son Dan claimed the backseat DJ role, switching from Ukrainian pop to metal.

After shuttling me around Bucha, Babyn Yar, and Kyiv the day before, as luck would have it, the family was heading east to my next destination: Poltava.

At a roadside stop, Dan and Natalia picked out candy for the trip—multicolored Haribo for himself and Ukrainian Toffifee for me. Breakfast of champions, and essential road trip fuel. I congratulated Dan on his power move commandeering the playlist and asked for his expert metal recommendations.

He gave a universal little boy smile—mischief, shyness, and a compulsion to say something clever.

“Carpetman,” he declared.

Alex laughed. “Not metal. A new Ukrainian musician.”

“Carpetman,” I repeated. “I’ll find it. What else? You must have more.”

“Metallica.” He confided his favorite tunes, with a little help from his dad.

After dropping off Natalia and Dan at their Poltava home, Alex drove me to an open field. We parked and walked.

The battlefield doesn’t announce itself—just open land, dry grass, an indifferent blue sky.

A small marker stands in the distance, one of several around the Poltava battlefield:

“The place where the Russian army crossed to the right bank of the Vorskla on three fords on June 20, 1709.”

It doesn’t mark the main clash itself, but the crossing of the Vorskla River was a decisive prelude to the engagement.

In 1709, this field was the site of one of the most consequential battles in European history. Peter the Great’s army defeated the forces of Sweden under Charles XII, marking the rise of Russia as a major imperial power.

For Ukraine, it marked something else: the long shadow of empire extending over land that had already been contested, divided, and fought over for generations.

Back in the car, Alex took me to the Poltava Battlefield Museum, where the story is laid out in careful detail—maps, uniforms, models, timelines.

One impression from the dizzying display of maps: lords, royals, generals, and commercial interests insisting that citizens and serfs throw their bodies into various slaughters to win slightly adjusted borders or economic prizes. Ukraine is often caught in between—resisting, aligning, breaking away, and being pulled back in.

On the way out, Alex pointed out the space at the entrance where a statue of Peter the Great once stood.

It was dismantled in February 2025.

After a traditional Poltava lunch and fond farewells, I was dropped off at a restaurant overlooking the city for a meeting with local artist Margaryta Beus. I was curious how the war is affecting local children, and how art creates channels for expressions of grief, fear, depression, or hope.

Margaryta Beus on Mime, Kids, and the War’s End

Margaryta: When I was young, I often recited poems at school. I was good at it. I always wanted to be an actress, but my parents wanted me to be a lawyer. I began studying law, but my mother had been living in Paris for ten years, and one day she told me she’d found an interesting school I might want to see.

I went, and it turned out to be a mime school—a private one. The director was Ella Yaroshevich, who had been married to Marcel Marceau, the most famous mime in the world. She herself was a well-known mime artist in

Paris in the 1970s and 1980s. She later founded her own school, and in 2009 I joined it.

I had just finished law school and didn't speak French at all. Getting a visa was unusual because normally you're required to speak the language, but I convinced the officer that mime was about movement, not words. At first it was difficult, but I learned French from friends who spoke English. Within about a year and a half, I could communicate fairly well.

Brian: The good thing about mime is you don't have to talk much—unlike acting in Brecht's theater in Paris, where you have to learn every line.

Margaryta: Exactly. In my second year, I became the best student in the school, and my director invited me to stay on and teach others. I did for a few months, but then my fiancé came to Paris, proposed to me, and I returned to Poltava.

Brian: How do you describe mime as an art form?

Margaryta: At first I thought it was simply acting without words. But it's much more than that. It's about creating your own world through movement. My teacher's method was unique because she integrated ballet and dance techniques into mime. You use your entire body—your movements, face, and expressions—to create an imaginary world. It's like a symphony of movement.

Brian: And when you thought about it as a career, were there limitations in Ukraine?

Margaryta: Yes. In Ukraine, mime is essentially dead. Maybe if I had started promoting it on social media five years ago, I could have built something, but I was fully involved in my work. When I came back, I tried offering classes, but no one was interested.

Mime is popular in France, South Korea, and the U.S., but not here. So I asked myself what I could do and began performing at weddings and children's parties—first welcoming guests, then doing bubble shows, and eventually full performances for kids. That grew into a business.

Brian: Tell me about your business.

Margaryta: Our company organizes children's parties, festivals, and events. We have our own costumes—characters like Elsa, Olaf, and Aladdin—and shows such as bubble shows, science shows, and paper shows.

We host events across Poltava—at clients' homes, schools, and gardens—and before COVID, we traveled all over Ukraine: Odesa, Kyiv, Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, and more.

Now, because of the war and restrictions, we mostly travel within 100–200 kilometers. We used to drive through the night, but with the current curfew from midnight to 4 a.m., that's no longer possible. So we mainly work around Poltava.

Brian: How have children been affected by the war?

Margaryta: When you talk to kids, they seem fine. They don't often say they're sad or scared, but when the topic of bombs comes up, they react. That's why my work feels important—to bring joy, to show them life goes on, and to encourage them to dream and achieve. We try to support their belief in a future.

Brian: Poltava seems relatively insulated from direct attacks. Are parents also somewhat protected from the war's effects?

Margaryta: Yes, we're lucky. There isn't much bombing here, and people don't hear explosions every day. So they're not as depressed as in other places.

When planning parties, they don't say, "If everything's okay, maybe we'll do it." They plan normally. Sometimes someone says, "My husband died at the front—could you do something free for the children?" and of course we say yes. But overall, life continues.

Brian: What's the general feeling in Poltava about how people want the war to end—both realistically and satisfactorily?

Margaryta: I sensed the war was coming. I had a feeling. A friend in Poland and I talked about it a lot before February 2022. Even now, I don't have clear answers.

Brian: That's an honest response. Many Ukrainians I speak with say the same thing—not slogans, but thoughtful realism.

Margaryta: Some people say, “We’re going to win,” but I think that’s a bit fanatical. Most people just want it to stop. I don’t want to die, and I don’t want my husband to die.

I don’t see that as betrayal—it’s just that I don’t want to die for someone else’s political game. There’s a huge political game happening, and we are small pieces in it.

Brian: Who are the players in that game?

Margaryta: I think the U.S., Germany, Poland, and Russia all have interests. At first, maybe they wanted to divide Ukraine. Then, when Ukraine resisted, they adjusted their plans.

I feel they’re all still connected somehow. Poland is already preparing for war—my friends there say men are being trained and assigned roles. Something larger may be developing, maybe involving all of Europe.

Brian: So you think it’s bigger than Ukraine?

Margaryta: Yes. Maybe it’s about Europe as a whole—Germany, Russia, and the U.S. included. But whatever it is, I don’t want to die for someone’s plans.

Brian: If Russia broke through and occupied Poltava, what would you do?

Margaryta: I’d run. I wouldn’t die for a flag. I don’t think it will come to that, but if it did, I’d leave.

Brian: What do you think Russia wants in Ukraine?

Margaryta: Power and territory. Historically, Russia has done this before—with Armenia and others. It’s not about slavery, but control.

And Ukraine has valuable resources—gas, minerals—especially in Poltava. So it’s not just about Russia; others have interests here too.

Brian: Some argue Russia was provoked by NATO expansion. Others say it’s pure aggression. How do you see it?

Margaryta: I’m not a political scientist, but I feel it’s not only Russia. Even Trump said he’d end the war—but he didn’t. There are always negotiations, but nothing changes.

Maybe he’s just incompetent, or maybe he’s part of something bigger. I’ve even heard conspiracy theories about Israel or Poland having plans for Ukraine. I don’t believe them, but people talk.

Brian: You mentioned that Poland once controlled parts of Ukraine.

Margaryta: Yes, and of course Poland has helped Ukrainians a lot. But it’s still possible that some people there think about reclaiming those lands.

Many believe there was a plan for the war to end in three days and for Ukraine to be divided.

I’m not angry about negotiations over territory. Historically, Ukraine’s borders have changed many times—parts of Moldova, Romania, Poland, Belarus, and Russia were once Ukrainian and vice versa. This land, as it is now, has existed for only about 60 years.

That’s not enough history for me to die for it. Maybe giving up some territory could end the war—not forever, but at least to save lives.

Brian: Some Ukrainians say they don’t want to abandon those living under occupation who don’t want to live under Russia.

Margaryta: If they truly didn’t want to stay, they could leave. Many do. Others just want peace.

I have a friend whose grandmother lives near the front line and says she doesn’t care who governs—she just wants the bombing to stop.

People in Crimea or Luhansk live okay; maybe prices are higher, but they survive. I know Ukrainians who went to Russia to avoid conscription. Some live good lives there. I don’t judge them.

I’ve even seen Russian propaganda videos promising rewards to families of fallen soldiers. It’s tragic. Propaganda is powerful there. But I don’t blame all Russians. Many protested and were arrested. Not everyone supports the war, but they live in fear.

Brian: What do you think President Zelensky should do now?

Margaryta: I’m not in his position, but if it were up to me, I would try to end the war—maybe negotiate. We lack people and resources.

Then I would focus on strengthening the army and building the economy to support defense.

I admire how countries like the U.S. and Israel cultivate respect for their soldiers. In Ukraine, that sense of gratitude is still developing. We need more communication between the government and the people.

For example, after Soviet traditions like Ded Moroz were banned, the government didn't offer strong Ukrainian alternatives. The Ministry of Culture could invest more in national stories and heroes, but they don't. Sometimes it feels like they don't prioritize unity.

Brian: When you hear an air raid siren in Poltava, what do you do?

Margaryta: Nothing. We're used to it.

The last big attack was in May or June—a bomb hit a French-owned factory. Sometimes people think the Russians target kindergartens or apartment buildings, but I believe they're aiming for military sites and the weapons miss.

One strike destroyed a nine-story building about 300 meters from a military base. I think the target was the base, not civilians—but people still died.

Even if we had shelters, they're not always nearby or safe. If it's my time, it's my time.

Everyone dies eventually.

Day 13: Kharkiv

Ruslan

From a street-side drink to the front lines of a city that refuses to fall

I arrive in Kharkiv at sunset, stepping off the train into a station filled with reunions—children running into the arms of fathers, uniformed soldiers embracing lovers. I am reminded of the iconic scene from *Reds*, as Diane Keaton nervously searches for Warren Beatty arriving on a Soviet train filled with wounded, exhausted, or dead soldiers.

In Lviv, I heard one or two air raid sirens. In Kyiv, one or two a day. Here, they are constant.

Kharkiv is a front-line city, thirty kilometers from the Russian border. The Russian military tried—and failed—to occupy it. It's an extraordinary bit of history: massive military hardware and troop volume, this close to the border, and they could not take the city.

Many fled using this same train station, once wrecked by Nazi assaults. It's still hard to grasp that, after Western and Russian military analysts believed Kyiv and the apparatus of government would fall within a week during the 2022 invasion, Russia has gained less than one percent of Ukrainian territory in three years.

Getting an Uber from the station requires patience. The military disrupts GPS signals to confuse incoming drones, so the app tells you to stand in one place while your driver waits somewhere else entirely. It took a dozen WTF Uber experiences before I caught on.

My former Koh Phangan neighbor Liam nominated the Nordian as his Kharkiv hotel choice. He joined the Ukrainian armed forces as a legionnaire and has sent me regular voicemail dispatches, sometimes while under artillery fire. When on leave in Kharkiv, he tells me and a friend that there is a burgeoning art scene here and that we should come out. I said OK. He thought I was kidding.

The Nordian is an… unusual hotel, fronted by an imposing, nondescript metal door, with a rickety birdcage elevator reminiscent of the *Angel Heart* scene where Mickey Rourke descends straight to hell.

The room is interesting. Small. I bump my head on the sloped ceiling twice. What it lacks in creature comforts, it makes up for in quirky charm.

Liam instructs me over Telegram to visit the Drunken Cherry, a short walk from the Nordian, next to a subway stop on a city-center street.

Piana Vyshnia is a favorite hangout for soldiers, couples, and the odd alcoholic busting their way into conversations. One elder, bearded fellow approached me wanting to be interviewed and delivered an extraordinary spontaneous riff on the war.

The shop serves only one drink: a tasty brew of cognac and cherries in paper cups for streetside consumption. *Vyshnia* originated in Lviv. Every family had their own brew, passed down through generations. My childhood favorite back in New York, Dr. Brown's Black Cherry Soda, was likely inspired by the drink.

I pan the scene for a short video. A young guy in a small group flashes a peace sign and calls out, "Hey bro."

I know no Ukrainian and they speak little English, but I wander over and ask: What should Americans understand about this war?

Two of the guys, sensing a performative moment for the assembled women, start to speak—but shyness or language limitations stop them short.

I'm enjoying the spontaneity of the moment, not knowing what to expect or whether my intrusion will offend any of the off-duty soldiers. The USA, after all, has repeatedly betrayed their country since the election of Mister Trump.

One of them steps forward, smiling, energized by the moment.

He thanks America for the weapons, for the support, for the chance to defend their country. And then, from just outside their circle, another fellow insists on sharing his view.

"My name is Ruslan," he says. "I am in the military. I want to say thank you. You give us opportunity… possibility to fight Russia."

He is 25. A helicopter pilot. Fresh-faced, closely cut hair. He wants to buy me a drink.

We go inside and order. I buy a Drunken Cherry keychain.

We step outside with paper cups of *vyshnia*. He is eager to talk. He shows me videos on his phone—views from the cockpit, flashes of combat. He lingers on one clip: the destruction of a friend's helicopter. He has stepped away from active duty for now to help his family. One parent is ill. He is studying again, working toward an English certification.

Before we part, he makes an offer.

Tomorrow, he will show me Kharkiv.

The next day, he picks me up at Kharkiv National University and drives me to a popular local destination. It is a graveyard for Russian military vehicles. Graffiti is scrawled across the destroyed hardware, much of it vulgar. A shattered drone lies across a bed of rusted artillery shells, its wings broken, its body torn open. Around it: fragments of missiles, twisted metal, scorched machinery.

"These are Russian," Ruslan says, pointing. "All of this."

He moves through it easily, reading the wreckage the way someone might read street signs.

"This one came to Kharkiv in 2024. Ukrainian soldiers destroyed it… to save the city."

Nearby, missiles have been welded into a kind of structure—part monument, part art installation. Rusted metal skulls stare outward from the frame. I sit in one of the makeshift chairs formed from captured or spent Russian weapons.

"I don't know how to say…" he begins, searching for the word. "Marauders."

Closed off in metal enclosures are odd assortments of household items: microwaves, a toilet, bottles, clothes.

"Look," he says. "It's crazy. Really."

I ask him why Russian troops took these items from local homes. He seems mystified—and angry. I make the mistake of asking what happened during the Russian occupation.

“*They didn’t occupy the city*,” he emphasizes. “But it was surrounded. Cadets—military students—first year, second year. Very young. They take guns. First battle.”

He pauses.

“And they destroyed these vehicles.”

We leave the exhibition and drive toward residential neighborhoods near the edge of the city, closer to the Russian border. Apartment blocks rise in long, repetitive lines, reminiscent of the Brooklyn housing projects where I grew up. You get to know your neighbors in places like this—on front stoops, in elevators, out in the open spaces.

At first glance, they feel intact. Then you notice the details: boarded windows, shattered glass, entire sections blown open and patched over. They are occupied largely by pensioners and young families. Ruslan explains that pensions are commonly the equivalent of about $60 per month.

A small group of elderly residents sits at a table under a tree, playing what looks like dominoes. He asks if I want to speak with them.

Of course.

He returns with a sheepish grin.

“They think you’re an American here to buy up the apartments and convert them, so they said you can just go fuck off.”

I don’t blame them.

One building bears a vertical scar through its middle floors—blackened, hollowed, still inhabited. A small playground stands off to one side—bright primary colors, a simple slide, a swing.

Up to half of these units were smashed, destroyed, boarded up, or abandoned. Those who could leave—who had family elsewhere—escaped the Russian assaults. Others could not afford to leave, had nowhere to go, or are simply stubborn.

“This is my home.”

Apartment blocks like these are routine targets of Shahed drones. Earlier today, five drones hit an apartment building a mile from my hotel, killing an entire family. The drones came from different directions. The strike was not a mistake.

Homes are targeted to terrorize. To weaken resolve.

Back in the car, Ruslan takes me on a tour of neighborhoods ravaged by missiles and drones. We walk through the central government district. He shows me videos of destruction as we stand in front of buildings—some rebuilt, some still bearing the scars.

I don't know what to say other than to bear witness. I ask him to pick a spot for dinner.

We sit outside at a local seafood place. The conversation shifts to his plans, to daily life with his family. He is curious about Thailand. He gives me a patch from his unit—a serious mark of our new friendship—and asks that I send him a photo with it the next time I'm in the United States.

I check in with Ruslan after I leave the country. He sends me news in two WhatsApp texts.

First, a photo of his English certification. He promised me during dinner that he would complete the course.

Then, an image of a map: Ukraine covered in arcs and lines and impact points—the visual trace of a single day of Russian attacks.

And later, a picture of him smiling, holding his newly earned commercial pilot's license—a step toward a future where he carries passengers instead of flying in combat zones.

"Hi man. I took a commercial pilot licence a week ago. It is first step to become a civil pilot. I would like to visit Thailand in short future with my parents)) . How are you, what is new?"

I tell him how proud I am of him. And promise that if he and his family come to Thailand, I'll give them a holiday they'll never forget.

Day 14: Kharkiv

A Visit with Gwara Media

I can smell startup energy. I founded two and supported others in my Silicon Valley days and the energy is equal parts inspired, driven, and exhausted. With the sudden, destructive withdrawal of USAID funding, projects like Gwara have to scramble to make do. No startup can afford to dwell on funding catastrophes too long. And so Gwara pushes on, doing work recently noted in the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

Founder and multitasking journo leader Serhii Prokopenko gives me the grand tour. The office is centered around a shared table used for both meetings and media recording. Microphones are mounted on adjustable arms, and a large circular reflector stands nearby. Cables run across the table and along the floor, connecting laptops, audio equipment, and lighting. A small recording room is lined with acoustic foam panels, containing monitors and gear. It's a corporate office, it's a television studio, it's an assignment desk, it's home to a very young staff.

Cardboard protest signs are stacked along one side of the room and on nearby surfaces, written in Ukrainian or English. The messages range from direct political statements to cultural references and humor. "Corruption destroys development" plays off "AH SHIT, HERE WE GO AGAIN" and "WE LOVE DEMOCRACY." And the ubiquitous "Free Azov."

Serhii shows me a framed journalism award. We step outside.

The interview takes place on a small terrace just above street level, with a view over low buildings and rooftops. The steep blue summer sky is fading into a narrow band of orange along the horizon. Streetlights begin to turn on across the neighborhood. There are a few simple chairs arranged around a small table. A folded umbrella leans against the railing. I continue to be astonished at the normal pace of daily life in Kharkiv and across the country, amidst constant air raid sirens and the threat of violence from the sky.

Gwara international editor Yana Sliemzina joins us.

Origins

Brian Gruber:
What is Gwara Media and why did you found it?

Serhii Prokopenko:
It started in 2015, just after Euromaidan. I was a participant in the protests, and Kharkiv at that time was both anti-Maidan and pro-Maidan. There was a big conflict and a lot of propaganda. People were saying things like "Bandera," or "Nazis everywhere." It was very distorted. I remember thinking how strange and how disconnected from reality this all was.

We were looking for a name for our newsroom, and we found the word "gwara." It means something like dialect—local speech, local expression.

Yana:
Yes, like a dialect. A local way of speaking.

Serhii:
In western Ukraine, this word was used as a kind of cultural marker. And we thought: here in Kharkiv, we also have culture, local narratives, local language.

But the country was constantly being divided—east versus west, different identities being used against each other. So we wanted to take something that could unify.

Every community has its own language, its own narrative. We wanted media to reflect that—to become a platform that unifies different voices rather than divides them.

So we chose this word, even though it's more associated with western Ukraine, and we brought it here, very close to Russia, as a kind of statement.

We wanted to show that Ukraine is one, even with different local identities.

That was the idea behind Gwara Media.

Journalism and the Price of Information

Brian:
How important is strong journalism to democracy in Ukraine?

Serhii:
It’s very important. I don’t want to sound banal, but during the war I really felt the value—the price—of information.

In normal life, when you scroll through TikTok, social media, or even ask something from AI, it’s all mixed together. It’s a kind of simulacra—everything blended, unclear sources, unclear reality. You don’t really know what’s happening.

But during the war, when something real happens—something terrible or something inspiring—you understand that only those who are on the ground can provide that information. All these bloggers, all these platforms—they use what journalists collect.

We collect the data. We verify it. We publish it. And I felt that very strongly—almost physically, like at the tips of my fingers. Without that, you live in emptiness. You have emptiness in social media, and you have real reporting. And that difference becomes very clear.

I don’t want to produce emptiness. I want to do something meaningful.

Yana:
For democracy, journalism is essential because it’s about truth, not just presenting different sides. If one side says it’s raining and another says it’s not, your job is not to present both views equally. Your job is to go outside and check.

That’s what journalism should be.

It’s about speaking to people who know, verifying facts, and presenting reality—even if it’s unpopular.

For example, with climate change, many scientists said it was real and urgent. Others said it wasn’t. Media often presented both sides, but that created confusion and downplayed the severity. Journalists should explain who those dissenting voices are, what their motivations are, and whether they are influenced by certain industries.

Right now, I think Western media has problems with naming things. They don’t say clearly who bombs Ukraine. They use passive voice. But we are here. We can say it directly.

We can say: this is the aggressor. This is a war crime.

And that matters.

Democracy Under Stress

Brian:
Is what's happening with protests and anti-corruption institutions a sign of a healthy democracy or a corrupt system?

Yana:
Why only two options? It can be both.

If people hadn't gone out to protest, anti-corruption institutions would have lost their independence completely. The government had justification—it said it was fighting Russian influence. And many officials genuinely believe that. They think it's logical during wartime to consolidate power.

But people protested. Even during martial law. Even with curfews.

That's important.

The government responded—not perfectly, but things became less worse. I'm not saying they became better. But it shows that civil society still exists and still functions.

If people can go out and say, "No, this is where we stop," then there is hope.

Disinformation as Industry

Brian:
Why is Russia so effective at disinformation?

Serhii:
Because they do it at an industrial level.

It's systematic.

They have troll factories. They have infrastructure. They invest money globally. They don't limit themselves by values or truth. They use money from resources and invest it into propaganda. The main problem is that

fighting disinformation is not industrial. It’s fragmented. It’s often volunteer-based.

Even strong organizations are small compared to the scale of propaganda.

Yana:
And propaganda is very effective because it amplifies existing tensions. It doesn’t create divisions—it finds them and pushes on them. Economic dissatisfaction, identity issues, social tensions—it uses all of that.

And there are many people involved—hundreds, maybe more.

So it becomes very efficient.

Fact-Checking as Resistance

Brian:
You emphasize fact-checking. Why?

Serhii:
We started fact-checking in the first days of the war. We asked ourselves how to adapt journalism to this reality. We decided to create a special fact-checking branch. Because during war, the role of facts increases. We also treat it as an archive—of fakes, of disinformation—for future research. We even produced research recognized internationally.

But fact-checking is difficult. It’s not viral. It’s not attractive. People prefer speculative content. So it becomes something for enthusiasts.

And it’s becoming harder. Artificial intelligence is now used by propagandists, and fact-checkers must also use it. We need tools to flag content, to identify risks, to work faster. But still, much of the work is manual.

And the imbalance remains.

Brian:
When Russia hits civilian buildings, is that bad targeting or intentional terror?

Yana:
Of course it’s intentional. Sometimes they hit military sites. But they also

target civilians deliberately. It’s not difficult to aim a drone. You can see in videos how they hit buildings directly.

Serhii:
Sometimes there may be bad intelligence, but—

Yana:
I don’t think focusing on bad intelligence is helpful. Russia targets civilians massively. It targets military and civilian sites. There is no ambiguity about that. They also spread propaganda afterward, claiming military targets, but that’s not what we see.

Leading a Team in Wartime

Brian:
How do you manage a team under these conditions?

Serhii:
We made many mistakes. People burned out. People broke. We had journalists covering extremely traumatic events.

One journalist came back after a year and said something important:

“No one knows how to live through this kind of war.”

We realized that physical safety is not enough. Psychological support is equally important.

Yana:
You have to communicate constantly. You have to give feedback gently. People are in fragile mental states. Sometimes you just tell someone: stop. Go rest. Even if there is more work.

Brian:
What’s the average age of your team?

Yana:
Around 27. Many are in their early 20s.

Serhii:
Older people often leave, or go to the frontline. So young people take on serious responsibility very quickly.

Brian:
How do you personally sustain yourselves doing this work?

Serhii:
It’s difficult. We didn’t know how to do this at the beginning. We are still learning.

Yana:
You develop coping mechanisms. You rely on each other. You try to create some balance. But it’s not easy.

Serhii:
This kind of work… it’s strange. The level of responsibility is very high. But the financial return is low. I was speaking with someone in tech earning much more, with far less risk. And I thought: this is very unbalanced.

But we still choose this.

As we wrap up, Yana mentions how rare it is to step out of the constant pace of work and talk about Gwara’s vision and evolution.

Serhii adds: “I like this kind of conversation. Usually we’re just in operation mode, especially today. It’s constant—boom, boom, boom. So this was good. A really good talk.”

On the way out, Serhii offers a parting gift—my choice of the cardboard protest signs used in past demonstrations.

At first, I’m drawn to a sly bit of Ukrainian humor: the iconic line from the first season of *True Detective*. “ЧАС—це ПЛАСКЕ КОЛО, МАРТІ.” *Time is a flat circle, Marty.* I’m a fan of the series, and it’s hard to resist.

Then Serhii holds up another.

“ДОСИТЬ КРАСТИ МАЙБУТНЄ!”
Stop stealing the future.

I take that one.

It travels with me for the final week of my journey across Ukraine, tucked into my backpack.

It now sits on my bookshelf in Bangkok, where I pass it several times a day.

A declaration of independence and resistance.

Reporting a Drone Strike

After spending time with Gwara Media's founder and staff, I asked to speak with a reporter who was covering that day's deadly Shahed drone strike, which killed a family of four in their apartment. I met one of their young frontline journalists at a popular local café.

Brian Gruber: Tell me what you do.

Hnat: My name is Hnat Holyk. I'm a journalist and head of the multimedia department at a local editorial outlet called Gwara Media. We operate in the Kharkiv region. I'm the producer, responsible for video reports about events in the region. We focus mainly on civilian stories in frontline villages and cities, asking people how they're doing, how they feel about the news, and how the situation at the front is changing. We also interview military personnel about their motivation and conditions at the front. Lately, we've begun speaking with politicians, police, activists, and volunteers, trying to go deeper into how they work and what drives them.

Brian: Why is what you do important?

Hnat: I believe that right now, any work that helps is valuable—it depends on each person's motivation. I started out volunteering, helping in a civilian humanitarian kitchen. Later, I switched to journalism because that's what I studied—filmmaking. I realized I could help by documenting events. Our team is made up of professionals who taught me a lot. It's not just about helping; it's also about personal growth and making a larger impact on society and Ukraine's support network.

Brian: Kharkiv is under constant threat. Air raid sirens go off all day. What's the difference between what you can do here as a journalist and what a reporter in Belgorod, across the Russian border, could do?

Hnat: That's a good question. Ukrainian politics and journalism work differently from Russia's. Ukraine has corruption, yes, but the system is more pluralistic. Even though oligarchs once dominated, their competition has actually helped Ukraine endure. In Russia, there's one central institution controlling everything. In Ukraine, multiple institutions—even corrupt ones—compete and balance each other. If we have an issue with

one agency, another can sometimes help. It's messy but transparent in its own way. Journalists can find alternate paths to information, and there's less centralized control than in Russia. It's closer to how checks and balances work in America, even if less efficiently.

Brian: You're too young to have lived in Soviet times, but in your study of Ukrainian history, how far has Ukraine come from authoritarianism? What's your report card for progress?

Hnat: I'm not a historian, but from what I've learned from older generations, the Soviet system rewarded some and crushed others. When the USSR collapsed, Ukraine inherited factories and industries without clear ownership. People received shares but didn't know how to manage them, and those who understood economics took control. That's how oligarchs emerged in the 1990s. You can't undo that now—the game was set. But since 2014, after the Revolution of Dignity, things changed. People demanded a better country, something closer to European democracy. The journey's been uneven, with corruption and economic crises, but there's been progress in civic participation and accountability.

Brian: Were you involved in Euromaidan?

Hnat: I was only 12 at the time. My parents wanted to go but stayed home to protect our family. I watched it all on TV—it felt like a continuous, dramatic show. Every day brought something shocking. At the time, I didn't understand the politics, only the violence and chaos. Later, I studied it and saw the bigger picture—why people protested, the role of right-wing groups, and how national identity shaped it all.

Brian: Tell me about your reporting. You recently covered a drone attack—what was that like?

Hnat: The attacks happened through the night, hitting one building five times. In the morning, after our daily briefing, I went to the site. By morning, several people were dead, and rescue teams were digging through rubble. I rushed there with my camera. The firefighters were just finishing their work. I filmed, took photos, and waited as more journalists arrived. It's always hard emotionally—people grieving, waiting for news of loved ones. You don't want to intrude, but documenting it is necessary. We know many of the emergency workers now from covering so many of these scenes.

Brian: How do you handle the emotional toll?

Hnat: During the work, emotions are off. You focus on safety and professionalism—filming, reacting quickly if there's another strike, doing your job. The emotional part hits later, after a day or two. You start thinking about the people you saw, the lives behind the images. It's heavy. You realize those weren't just bodies—they were families. You question your role: asking grieving people for interviews feels cruel, but documenting the truth is essential.

Brian: Why do you keep doing it?

Hnat: Because I want to have an impact. I lost friends. My father serves in the military. I tried to enlist in 2022, but they said I was too young. I felt frustrated, so I started volunteering—building bunk beds for refugees, taking training courses. Eventually, I turned to journalism, which lets me help, earn a living, and grow. It connects me to people and gives meaning to my work.

Brian: Why do Ukrainians resist? What are they fighting for?

Hnat: It depends on the person, but mostly it's anger—betrayal. Before the war, people here traveled to Russia freely. Many had family there. When the invasion began, Russian relatives would call saying, "Don't worry, we'll save you soon." Ukrainians were shocked. They didn't need saving. That betrayal —seeing people they loved justify the attack—fueled rage and determination. Many of my friends joined the army on their own. I didn't stop them. We're all adults making choices. The soldiers often tell me, "Don't rush to join. You're more useful as a journalist." So I help from here.

Brian: When Kharkiv was under threat of occupation, what was life like then?

Hnat: I wasn't in Kharkiv during the occupation—I was volunteering in Lviv. My parents evacuated my siblings, then returned home when the Russians stalled. When Kharkiv region was liberated, we went there as volunteers and later as journalists. We interviewed civilians who had stayed. Some said Russian soldiers didn't harm them; others described looting and killings, like in Izium where around 400 people were buried in the forest. We documented all sides. Our concern now is protecting those we interviewed—both from Russian retribution if they return and from

Ukrainian authorities who might suspect collaboration. Our job is to record what people experienced, truthfully.

Brian: People everywhere can grow tired of hearing about war. How do you and your editors keep your audience engaged?

Hnat: It's hard. Locals are exhausted. You can't shock them anymore—bombs and deaths have become routine. But we keep telling the stories, reminding them that every life lost could have been theirs. We focus on people—their strength, their humor, their survival. It's not just about tragedy; it's about resilience.

Brian: And what about you personally? How do you stay mentally healthy living so close to the border?

Hnat: Life has changed. I've learned how I react under stress. I don't panic like I did in 2022. I focus on the job first and process emotions later. Like medics at the front, we use dark humor to cope. If you don't laugh, you collapse. Everyone here is stressed. Air raid alerts have become background noise. I rely on Telegram channels that track incoming drones and missiles. They're more accurate than official alerts. If I know a drone is heading for Saltivka, I don't run to the shelter—I know it'll take time to reach downtown. You adapt. It's strange, but it becomes normal.

Brian: How often are there attacks now?

Hnat: They come in waves. Sometimes there's nothing for two weeks, then several days of strikes. You never get used to it, but you adjust.

Brian: When Russians hit apartment buildings full of pensioners, what's the purpose?

Hnat: In areas like Saltivka, those buildings were near the front early in the war. Some Ukrainian troops used abandoned apartments as defensive positions. So those high-rises became shields for the city. Civilians were evacuated when possible. It's tragic—people lost their homes, their lives—but that's war. Many soldiers were once civilians themselves. Now everything is mixed—there's no clear line between soldier and civilian anymore.

Brian: What's your view on conscription—forcing people into the army?

Hnat: I’m about to be mobilized myself. I’m 24. I haven’t been pressured, but I’ve seen friends taken suddenly. The system still works like it did in Soviet times—chaotic and sometimes abusive. Some mobilization officers are traumatized veterans who lash out. Now they’re paired with police, which makes it slightly more legal but still messy. I’m preparing myself. I don’t want to be grabbed off the street. There are legal ways to avoid service if you’re helping the country otherwise—through journalism, volunteering, or education. You just need to know your rights.

Brian: Do you think conscription is justified at all?

Hnat: It’s complicated. I’m against forced mobilization. It’s ineffective and undemocratic. But if no one volunteers, who will defend us? People should understand the risks and make an informed choice. You can serve in many ways—build drones, study, volunteer. You don’t have to run from the country. War takes lives—soldiers and civilians alike. What matters is doing something meaningful for those you love.

Day 15: Kharkiv

Art, War, and the Refusal to Leave

In a bare gallery—concrete floors, paintings clustered tightly along white and black walls—I meet Magran Tata, founder and curator of an artist-run space within Kharkiv's DRUK cultural and community center.

We move through the building as he talks. Past the gallery and into a low-ceilinged storage room, paint peeling in soft blue layers, a single bulb hanging over a clutter of canvases, guitars, and plastic bags. Down to a performance space—drum kit set, amps stacked, microphones waiting. Outside, in a worn brick courtyard, artists and guests gather around low tables, sharing food and drinks. Then back upstairs, where Magran stops every few steps to greet someone—a staff member, an artist, a visitor—the place alive with quiet, constant motion.

DRUK takes its name from the Ukrainian word for "printing," a nod to the building's past as a working print factory in a city long known for publishing and intellectual life. That history has been directly targeted—Russian strikes on Kharkiv's printing infrastructure, making clear that culture itself is part of the war. Out of that damage, DRUK has re-emerged in a different form: not a factory of books, but a living space where artists, musicians, and writers gather, create, and remain visible.

Magran pauses in front of the paintings and turns back to me.

Magran Tata: We're at the gallery whose name translates loosely as "Creative Fluke" or "Creative Illness." It's located on the second floor of DRUK, a multifunctional cultural and social center here in Kharkiv. DRUK hosts different kinds of art residents: a theater, an art gallery, and various creative workshops.

Right now we're standing in our exhibition space, which opened one month ago. Today is the final day of the show. It's called "Fragments." The artist, Lefkov, is seventy-four years old and comes from Drohobych. He's a very experienced man—he used to teach icon restoration at a university, focusing on Orthodox church paintings, and he's written several books on that subject.

He reached out to us himself. He called and asked if he could hold an exhibition here. I said, “Send a few samples of your work.” When I saw them, I was blown away. He first sent a catalog and one painting—a portrait of Jesus—and told us we could keep it. His work is very spontaneous. He paints quickly and adds unconventional materials—things like cigarette packaging—directly onto the surface.

The frames are all handmade too. He found the professional framing costs too high, so he started building frames from scratch. Sometimes he paints over old works or uses cardboard as canvas. Behind some paintings, you can see the raw material showing through.

His style? I’d describe it as a cross between religious iconography and surrealism—something between a traditional church aesthetic and the energy of Basquiat. This show is unusual for him, though. Normally, he exhibits carefully restored icons painted on reclaimed wood. But here, he shared deeply personal works created between 2016 and today.

He didn’t provide titles or descriptions. He just told us these are “fragments”—pieces of his heart, not part of any single narrative. He paints several works a day—he’s incredibly prolific. And he’s also a volunteer for the front line. He sells his icons and paintings at auctions to raise money for the army. He travels constantly—east, south, west—wherever he can help.

Brian: What’s it like to manage an art space like this—so close to the Russian border, in a city that was invaded—over the last three years? How has that evolved?

Magran: Actually, this gallery was born because of the war. When the full-scale invasion began, I didn’t know any of the people I now work with. All the big municipal and government art institutions were closed. So I started organizing exhibitions wherever I could—first in coffee shops, then pop-up shows on the streets.

Eventually, I won a small grant—about five to seven hundred dollars—which allowed us to rent a small place downtown for half a year. Then we moved here to DRUK in autumn 2023. Just a few months ago, we celebrated our second anniversary.

We’re a nonprofit gallery. Everyone here has another job, so this is a labor of love. Donations—whether equipment, materials, or money—go toward

rent or hosting events. Sometimes we pay visiting lecturers or buy licenses for film screenings.

From the start, our mission has been to promote young artists. In traditional galleries, you might wait years for an exhibition slot—everything's booked far in advance. We wanted to build an artist-driven space focused on debut exhibitions, giving new voices a chance to be seen.

Why They Stay

Brian: Tell me about the decision of young artists to stay in Kharkiv when so many have left. What motivates them to remain?

Magran: Everyone has personal reasons, but mostly people stay because they love the city—and because there are new possibilities here. So much has to be rebuilt from scratch that there's space for new ideas, new scenes, and new projects.

Also, most cultural work here has a charitable aspect. Artists often donate a percentage of their earnings from events to help the army or humanitarian efforts. Many travel around Ukraine performing concerts or exhibitions to raise money for different brigades stationed near Kharkiv.

There's also a strong underground movement. People have re-evaluated their values since the invasion. There's less focus on materialism, more on human connection and meaning. We often organize group shows combining young and established artists—to exchange experience and inspire one another.

Brian: How has the city's population shift affected your audience?

Magran: Before the war, roughly one-third of Kharkiv's population were students—about 300,000 out of a million residents. That's changed a lot. Many students moved to other cities where they could attend classes in person. All Kharkiv universities are still online, which makes the city less attractive for young people.

At the same time, we've gained new residents—people displaced from occupied regions and relatives of soldiers. So the city's demographic has changed dramatically.

For us, our main audience is still young—mostly 16 to 25-year-olds, students and creative people. Our gallery is always free, with optional donations. We're rooted in the local community.

From Aleppo to Kharkiv

Brian: You're an artist, not a soldier. Why is resistance important to you, and how does it affect your life and work?

Magran: Probably because of my background. I'm from Aleppo, Syria. My family moved to Ukraine in 2012. We decided to stay in Kharkiv because we were tired of constant displacement. We wanted to stop running and build something lasting.

That's one reason I founded this space with friends. We also support independent theaters and performance groups that need a place to rehearse or perform. We've hosted acoustic concerts, film premieres—even documentaries made by our visitors. DRUK has become a home for many forms of media—film, theater, visual art—all in one place.

Brian: You were in Aleppo during the civil war?

Magran: Yes, we left when I was ten years old, right as the fighting intensified. The clashes had reached our neighborhood. That experience—seeing destruction and instability—shapes how I view this war too.

Brian: Why do you like Kharkiv?

Magran: Because it's inclusive. If I don't say my name, most people don't realize I'm not Ukrainian. The city is the perfect size—not as overwhelming as Kyiv, not as small as other regional towns. It's balanced, energetic, and creative. It feels like home.

Brian: To what degree do drone attacks or other violence affect your daily life? Do you still react, or just carry on?

Magran: We carry on. There's a shelter here in the cultural center—it's called the "Art Shelter." You can visit it later and meet our administrator. I'm the founder and curator of the gallery, but DRUK has many teams and residents working across different disciplines. We've learned to live with the danger—to adapt and continue creating despite it.

Day 16: Kharkiv

The Choice to Fight

Liam Fletcher is roughly half my age, but for a time we shared a similar life as neighbors on the Thai island of Koh Phangan—writing, beaches, a carefree expatriate rhythm.

Then Russia invaded Ukraine.

Our Russian friends Olga and Sasha went to the Polish border to help displaced families. Liam went to the front line, joining the International Legion in Ukraine's defense.

Our first extended conversation took place while I was in Barcelona researching the Spanish Civil War for *My Fabulous Fascist Summer Vacation*. We spoke about George Orwell and others who chose to fight in Spain, and how that moment in history shaped decisions like Liam's.

What follows are excerpts from four conversations, exploring his experience on the front lines and his understanding of Russia's imperial project.

Notes From the Front Lines

Brian Gruber: Where are you as we're speaking?

Liam Fletcher: I'm sitting outside near the central Maidan and administrative center—about to move, actually. Give me a minute and I'll walk around the corner into a more… historical setting.

There's a message just come through from a friend—we're heading back to the safe house. Everything's closing. No shops, no cafés. I've relocated now—I'm sat in the main maidan opposite the Slovyansk Town Hall, where all this brouhaha began. These administrative buildings were where Girkin's first militia launched the initial seizures of Donbas territory. It happened here first, then spread to Donetsk and over into Luhansk, where my battalion is fighting now—98% Russian-occupied as of spring 2024, and the remaining sliver fiercely contested.

Curfew is imminent. It's earlier in Donetsk, though in truth Luhansk is a battlefield in its entirety—from Borova towards Svatove and down to the Serebryansky Forest, our battleground, what Ukrainians call *Lis Chudes*—the Forest of Wonders—and what foreigners simply call Kreminna Forest and shudder at the name. Taxis will stop running in ten minutes or so, but I'll sit here for a bit. Have a coffee. Contemplate things. Tell tales, and talk to you about the way the world was—and is.

Brian: Before we get into that—tell me about yourself.

Liam: I should probably begin with a disclaimer. If I ramble, it's because I've had brain injuries—some before the war, and some more recently courtesy of Russian artillery and mortar fire. Diffuse axonal damage, traumatic encephalopathy, lesions and gliosis across both hemispheres, and about ten hemorrhages now. So if this goes long… blame that.

I'm 35. Ancient. Physically creaky.

I was born either in Ireland or England—born to an Irish mother, then adopted by an English Catholic family in Leeds. Arranged by the Church. But I was adopted by good people and raised by a loving mother, which makes all the difference in the world.

Arrival and Escalation

Brian: When did you go to Ukraine?

Liam: Late 2022. I started in Kharkiv doing humanitarian work—food relief, deliveries, hospitals, schools. World Central Kitchen mostly, six days a week, but I worked with a range of NGOs.

Then things escalated. Kupyansk evacuations, the Konstantynivka situation—where we retrieved medical supplies, couldn't deliver them onward, and three days later a missile hit the market and killed twenty-six civilians. Bakhmut had fallen, the summer offensive had failed, and along the Kupyansk-Lyman axis things were deteriorating badly, especially in the Serebryansky Forest.

So in September 2023 I joined the army. Training, then the International Legion, then into the 2nd Battalion fighting in that forest—the so-called gates of the Donbas. It was some of the fiercest fighting. Foreign legions

have historically been used as cannon fodder, and you expect to be thrown into the *myasorubka*—the meat grinder—and that's exactly where we went.

And I'll say this—people who laugh at the incompetence of the Russian army don't understand what's happening. They have overwhelming firepower. Their artillery teams are very, very good—sickeningly precise.

Time, Distance, and the Physics of War

Brian: How close are you to the front?

Liam: Close enough that time stops behaving properly. At the zero line, seconds drag and minutes vanish. You make decisions that feel like they take an age, and then you watch the footage later and it happens in a blink. Time perception becomes warped—almost unreal.

Even in Kharkiv, barely twenty-five kilometers from the Russian border, missiles come in from Belgorod. From launch to impact, you've got about thirty seconds. That's the grim reality. So when people talk about air raid sirens—what are they for? What's a babushka on the fifth floor supposed to do in thirty seconds?

There's no time.

It lands—or it doesn't.

And what struck me most is the calm. Nobody runs screaming. There's a kind of serene apathy to it. They are a stoic, indomitable people.

Brian: What does that sound like?

Liam: It's not constant, which is worse. You can sit in quiet, and then something lands with precision. That's what unnerves you—the randomness paired with accuracy.

In the Serebryansky Forest, we're sometimes thirty-five to seventy meters from Russian positions. That's a few seconds running distance. There are mines and claymores between us, but at night they infiltrate—using thermal-masking ponchos, creeping right up to the trench line.

One moment it's quiet—All Quiet on the Kreminna Front—and the next, they're right there, fighting at close range.

You never relax.

Brian: How do you adapt to that?

Liam: Safety is as thin as a spring frost. You stop thinking in terms of safety. There is no safe—only more likely or less likely. Where you sit, when you move, how long you stay—it becomes instinctive. A kind of subconscious calculus.

Brian: You mentioned being hit.

Liam: A 120mm mortar landed essentially on me. It should have killed me. By some freak stroke of luck, I avoided the shrapnel and just took the blast wave.

Brain hemorrhages, cortical damage, ear bleeding. So now I'm just… slightly more frazzled than before.

That's the nature of it. Sometimes you don't die—you just carry the damage forward.

Capture, Threat, and Psychological Reality

Brian: What's the hardest part?

Liam: The awareness—that if things go wrong, they go very wrong.

Not just death. Something worse. We've seen what happens when people are captured. Two Georgian comrades—close friends of someone I was with—taken. No one's heard from them since.

You don't need details.

And it's not abstract. There are Telegram channels—millions of followers. They get hold of footage, identify people by face. They posted videos of me and two others—named us, wrote biographies, described what they'd do to us if captured.

Very graphic. It sharpens things. It reminds you who you're actually facing. There's no illusion. No romanticism.

Brian: What about the people around you?

Liam: It’s a strange mix—Georgians, Belarusians, Poles, Brazilians, Ukrainians. Different languages, different backgrounds. You end up speaking in whatever works—Russian, Ukrainian, Spanish, English.

But you end up in the same place, and that becomes its own kind of fraternity.

Different reasons, same reality.

Brian: How do you deal with losses?

Liam: There isn’t really a process. People die. People are wounded. People disappear. Often you don’t get closure. You just carry it.

Brian: Are you afraid?

Liam: Of course.

At first it’s overwhelming. Later it becomes background noise.

But you feel it differently—especially for your friends. When one of my comrades was hit by a tank—not a direct hit, thankfully—I was frantic. Fear evolves. What replaces it is clarity.

Brian: And you stay because of that clarity?

Liam: Yes. Once you see it up close, it’s very difficult to walk away. Not because of ideology. Because it’s real.

Orwell, Spain, and Moral Choice

Brian: You’ve mentioned Orwell—what’s the connection between your choice to fight here and Orwell’s choice to fight in the Spanish Civil War?

Liam: Orwell understood that history forces choices. For a culture to survive, it has to fight—even if that means dirtying yourself. Those who live by the sword may perish by the sword, but those who don’t fight die in other ways.

We’ve reached a strange point where people question whether democratic societies are worth defending at all, while ignoring the atrocities of genuinely totalitarian regimes.

Orwell saw through that.

I went to Orwell Plaza in Barcelona—I ended up tearful. Not nostalgia, but recognition.

Those volunteers were a minority—people who refused to be held hostage to history. They believed in a fraternity of ordinary people fighting back against what you might call *the men of always*.

Most people watched with indifference. That hasn't changed.

Brian: So what are you fighting—fascism?

Liam: You can certainly make a case for fascism. Fascism, as its founder described it, is corporatism allied with religion.

Putin has a corporatocracy—oligarchs under his control—and like Hitler, those who don't comply disappear. He also has the backing of the Russian Orthodox Church, which actively supports the war, framing it as something close to a holy mission.

That puts him closer to Franco or Mussolini—the original fascist model, corporatism with religious backing.

So yes, you can call it fascism.

Brian: But that's not the whole picture?

Liam: No. Because it misses the deeper pattern. He's not restoring the Soviet Union. He's resurrecting something older—the Russian Empire. He's a KGB man, historically aware, trying to restore what he sees as lost greatness. It becomes almost a religious crusade—the restoration of Mother Russia to its rightful place. This isn't ideology in the abstract. It's history repeating.

Brian: Explain that.

Liam: Russia has always been expansionist. Before the Soviets, you had the Tsar's secret police—the Okhrana. Different system, same machinery. The Soviet Union collapses—chaos, oligarchy—and then a strongman takes control again.

Same pattern.

What Putin has revived is empire—territory, control, domination. That's the through-line.

Brian: So this is about power.

Liam: Yes. People were desperate for stability after the Soviet collapse, so they accepted a strongman. It's not unlike Germany in the 1930s—order at any price. Putin consolidates power, controls the oligarchs.

And religion reinforces it. It makes people obedient. It makes good people do wicked things and bad people do barbaric things. The Russian Orthodox Church has framed this war as a holy war.

Brian: So this war was inevitable?

Liam: In a sense. Once a strongman takes power, expansion follows. Any negotiated peace just delays the next phase. It always has—and always will.

Ukrainians understand exactly what Russian rule means—suppression of language, culture, identity. That's why they fight. This isn't abstract. It's historical memory. They know if they stop, it doesn't end. It pauses. They haven't been softened. They still recognize an enemy and understand that survival requires resistance.

Brian: What do you hope for Ukraine?

Liam: A future where they're left alone. Where people can live, create, breathe—without fear of missiles, of violence, of repression.

Brian: And for you?

Liam: I don't think I'm special. I think I'm part of a small minority who didn't sit it out. Every so often, something happens where the stakes are clear. And you decide whether to stay or leave. For now, I've stayed. And I intend to stay until the end, doing my part as best I can. As a friend once told me: just because it's a cold and cruel world doesn't mean we should stop trying to make it better.

The Doctor Is Always In

Liam spoke warmly of a Palestinian doctor named Yaser Alsaidi, who treated him after serious battlefield injuries. Liam insisted that I meet the doctor to understand another side of the city's resistance.

We met in a café in the center of town before continuing on to Kharkiv National University.

Yaser greeted me with an easy warmth and insisted I choose something from the case of brightly colored desserts. I hesitated—it's not my usual afternoon habit—but he waved it off with a smile. His treat.

The macarons looked good. Maybe the cheesecake.

He ordered both. And one more for himself.

The sugar-caffeine surge set my heart racing. Watching him, I had the sense this routine indulgence was not unfamiliar as he moved through hospital shifts, wartime emergencies, and volunteer coordination.

He is a gentle presence—compassionate, attentive, fiercely committed to his work.

What follows are excerpts of our two encounters.

Brian Gruber: Tell me what you do.

Yaser Alsaidi: My name is Yaser Alsaidi. I'm Palestinian from Gaza and the head coordinator of foreign volunteers in Ukraine. I also work closely with many international organizations helping Ukraine—UNHCR, the Ukrainian Red Cross, the International Red Cross, and others.

Brian: What does a typical day look like for you?

Yaser: Most of my days are spent at the hospital. When I get home, I might get three hours of sleep—sometimes less. Often, I sleep at the hospital. That's the daily reality.

Brian: Why are you committed to this work?

Yaser: Because it's the right thing to do. It's about being human and helping people when they need it most. In times like this, doing the right thing means helping.

Brian: When you see what's happening in your homeland in Gaza and what's happening in Ukraine, how does that affect your sense of the human condition in 2025?

Yaser: I feel the pain of the Ukrainian people because I've lived through similar suffering in Gaza. It motivates me even more to help. I know what it means to lose your home, family, everything—in a second. I don't wish that on anyone.

Brian: How do you maintain your psychological and emotional balance when exposed to so much suffering?

Yaser: Believing that I'm doing this to help people eases the pain. It's dangerous work—we could die at any moment. But knowing we're helping gives meaning and strength.

Brian: You live and work a short drive from the border. Why did Russia invade Ukraine? What do they want?

Yaser: They claim they're protecting Russian speakers in eastern Ukraine. That's nonsense. You don't protect someone by killing them. Those areas are destroyed. This invasion isn't logical—if you're "protecting," you don't wipe out the people you say you're protecting.

Double Standards

Brian: When we entered the university, you mentioned it was founded in the 1700s, under Imperial Russia. Kharkiv has been part of the czarist empire, the Soviet Union, and now independent Ukraine. What's similar in the mindset of those three systems?

Yaser: From Putin's point of view, the Soviet Union never ended. He believes there's no world without Russia and wants to rebuild that empire. Ukraine is only the beginning. If the world doesn't stop him, he'll move on to other countries. Stopping him here protects all of Europe.

Brian: Is there a lesson that connects what's happening in Gaza and Ukraine?

Yaser: Yes—the double standards of the international community. It's unacceptable that bombing civilians is condemned in one place and tolerated in another. What's happening in Ukraine and Gaza are both massacres, genocides, and war crimes. International law should apply equally to everyone.

Brian: You came to Ukraine 13 years ago. What brought you here?

Yaser: I came to study medicine. I graduated from Karazin University with honors in general medicine and later specialized in neurosurgery. Ukraine supported me from the start; it became my home.

Brian: You've lived in Kharkiv for many years. How do people here manage to live normal lives under war?

Yaser: Ukrainians have an incredible capacity for resilience. But psychologically, adapting to war isn't normal. I don't wish it on anyone. People try to live their lives, but we all want real peace and normal life back.

Brian: When air raid sirens go off and no one reacts, what does that say about adaptation?

Yaser: People have gotten used to it. In Kharkiv, alarms sound every few minutes. Often, the bomb hits before the siren even finishes. People know if it's your turn to be hit, you won't even hear the alarm. So it becomes background noise.

Brian: How frequent are those sirens compared to western cities?

Yaser: In Kharkiv, more than 20 times a day. Sometimes an alarm lasts for hours. Because Kharkiv is so close to the border, every missile heading west passes over us. It's constant.

Brian: Yesterday there were five Shahid drones striking a residential building and killing a family. Why target civilians?

Yaser: It's psychological warfare—to create fear and force people to flee. Over 90% of attacks target civilians. When five Shahids hit one apartment building, killing children and families, that's not a mistake. It's terror and a war crime. Like the direct missile strike on Kyiv's children's hospital. Russia invents military excuses for propaganda, but the intent is to destroy lives.

Freedom and Solidarity

Brian: We have a mutual friend in the Legion, Liam Fletcher. He speaks highly of you. Many foreigners have come to Ukraine to fight. Why do they risk their lives?

Yaser: Because they believe in freedom and solidarity. They see injustice and want to help. Some donate, others volunteer, and some fight. Many are disappointed in their governments' inaction, so they act themselves. That's courage.

Brian: Some argue Ukraine should surrender to stop the killing. Why do Ukrainians keep fighting?

Yaser: Because it's their homeland. You fight for your home and your freedom—not for money. No Ukrainian will accept losing Crimea or any occupied region. This war didn't start in 2022—it started in 2014. Yet global attention fades. We need steady, real support until victory.

Brian: Some leaders have nominated Donald Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize. What do you think?

Yaser: Peace isn't about words; it's about results. If he deserves that prize, we need to see real action—peace, not promises. For Ukraine, peace means full freedom and restoration of its territory.

Brian: How can that happen? Russia has a massive army and no limits.

Yaser: That's why international support is essential—not only words but real action. Russia is backed by other authoritarian countries, which makes things worse. To balance the scales, Ukraine needs weapons, logistics, and commitment. Words don't stop missiles.

Life in Gaza

Brian: You lived in Gaza 13 years ago. What was life like then?

Yaser: Peaceful—but peace in Gaza never lasts. It's always interrupted by conflict. One moment life is calm, the next you hear bombs. That's normal there.

Brian: Is there a path to peace?

Yaser: The conflict's been going for 75 years. Peace will only come when freedom comes—like in Ukraine. There must at least be a ceasefire and humanitarian aid—food, medicine, evacuation of patients. Otherwise, the suffering will deepen.

Brian: With so much destruction and settlement expansion, is a two-state solution still realistic?

Yaser: Even the idea of a two-state solution is broken. Israel's occupation keeps expanding—taking more land, more lives. If they truly wanted peace, they'd stop. Many people around the world, including Jewish communities, now see the truth and support Palestine. Despite misinformation, the truth always emerges.

Day 17: Dnipro

The Lovebirds

I board the bus for Dnipro, but first, a final visit to Kharkiv's Lovebirds.

In each city, I find small spaces of serenity. In Lviv, the city center's outdoor cafés; in Kyiv, the quiet solemnity of the Maidan; in Poltava, the hilltop views of the countryside. In Kharkiv, it's the Lovebirds.

Just past the once-bombed, now bustling Nikolsky Mall, and beyond the leafy Peremohy Garden Square fronting the aptly named Church of the Holy Myrrh-Bearing Women, stands a bronze sculpture. Two slender figures—a young boy and girl—lean toward each other, meeting in a tender kiss. It was designed by Dmytro Ivanchenko, winner of a 2002 competition for architectural students. The assignment: create a unique monument dedicated to love.

I stop at a florist on the way and ask for a bouquet of yellow flowers, then place it at the fountain circling the sculpture. I sit for a while, watching mothers play with their children, then head to the bus depot.

A Stroll Through Rocket City

Dnipro was known as "Rocket City" during the Cold War. As a center of Soviet military, nuclear, and space industries, it was closed to outsiders until the 1990s due to its role in manufacturing intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and satellite launch vehicles.

The Dnipro River is the fourth largest in Europe, stretching some 2,200 kilometers from Russia through Belarus, then south through Kyiv and Dnipro to the Black Sea. My first encounter with it came in Kyiv, walking up the Andriyivskyy Descent with Bucha film producer and longtime Zelensky television writer Oleksandr Shchur. After checking into my hotel, with a few hours before my next interview, I head out for a walk along the river.

There are Soviet-era monuments throughout the country. Some, honoring World War II bravery and resistance, remain. Others—like the Peter the Great statue in front of the Poltava museum—have been removed. Here, a

plaque honors Soviet engineering and pontoon units who crossed the Dnipro during the 1943 liberation.

Further along the embankment stands *Youth of the Dnipro*, a bronze sculpture by Petro Kutsenko depicting three young women in traditional dress aboard a boat, releasing flower wreaths onto the river. Nearby, a chubby, childlike figure from Slavic folklore—*Kolobok in Love*—sits on a bench covered in "love locks," padlocks left by couples as tokens of devotion. Another bench features playful cartoon animal figures.

I try to sit on one of the inviting bean bags scattered across the grass to take in the sun and watch the river, but a young attendant insists on a rental fee. My lack of Ukrainian short-circuits the negotiation, and I move on.

A short set of stairs leads up to a large green sphere, its surface covered in layers of handwritten messages—terms of endearment, phone numbers, names, declarations, inside jokes.

"YOU MUSTN'T BE AFRAID TO DREAM A LITTLE BIT BIGGER, DARLING."

Bulldozer

I meet the Bulldozer team through a chain of introductions. Nigel, a British journalist, is an active supporter and volunteer. He arranges the meeting through a series of exchanges—a small example of the broader network of people, Ukrainian and foreign, who have found ways to contribute.

We meet at Varburger, a popular burger joint with an outdoor patio that screens films and regularly supports Bulldozer.

In Ukraine, when a soldier is killed, the military code is "200." *Evacuation 200*—sometimes called "On the Shield"—refers to the act of bringing fallen soldiers home. It requires refrigerated vehicles, coordination, and a willingness to enter places most people would avoid. Families cannot do this themselves, and while the Ukrainian military does its best, the need exceeds its capacity.

Bulldozer is one of the volunteer groups that fills the gap. It was started by Serhii's father. Oleg, one of the principal drivers, joins us.

“Bulldozer is a civilian humanitarian organization,” he explains. “We are volunteers—there are no salaries. Our main work is connected to fallen soldiers. Sometimes we assist in locating bodies, but primarily we transport fallen soldiers from the front line back to their homes, so their families can bury them properly. We also help families with documents—what to do, who to call, how to move through the process—so things don’t take longer than they already must.”

I asked how unusual this kind of work was, and how it had started.

“Yes. It’s unusual—and very difficult. Mentally and physically. We drive enormous distances—right now around 60,000 kilometers per month.”

The origin of the work went back before the full-scale invasion, to his father, Oleksandr Nahaiets—call sign “Bulldozer.”

“He began this work during his military service in 2015–2016. He was assigned to evacuation.”

It was dangerous work.

“He was one of the few people who could cross the front line—even into occupied territory—to retrieve bodies.”

After leaving the military, his father continued on his own. Eventually, the work required something more formal.

“A civilian driving a refrigerated vehicle across the line needed legal structure. So, he formalized Bulldozer as an organization.”

When the full-scale invasion began, that structure became essential.

“On February 24, 2022, everything changed,” Serhii said.

His father had been on his way to do something else entirely.

“He went to return a refrigerated vehicle to his employer, but the owner told him: If you need it for evacuation, take it.”

In those first days, nothing was organized.

“At first, nobody even knew how to respond. The system was overwhelmed.”

Then the calls started.

“Within days, he was told to go to Sumy region and begin evacuations.”

There was a moment where he could have chosen a different path.

“He was standing in line to receive a weapon to join territorial defense. But they told him: We need you more doing this.”

I asked Serhii and Oleg whether they were alone in doing this work.

“No. The military has its own system, and other groups exist.”

But in the early months, that system wasn’t enough.

“The scale of death was overwhelming. The number of fallen in those first months was comparable to the entire period from 2014 to 2022.”

The infrastructure hadn’t caught up.

“Transport, morgues—it wasn’t ready. That’s where volunteers like Bulldozer became essential.”

I asked how they funded it.

“Mostly through donations and partnerships. My father’s military salary goes directly into the organization.”

Support came in fragments.

“Businesses help. Some provide fuel cards. Others provide tires, repairs.”

And the drivers?

He gave a small shrug.

“All volunteers. We have around 12 to 14 vehicles now, but no salaries. Sometimes donors give money specifically for drivers, and we share it. But normally—no pay.”

The cost, even without salaries, was substantial.

“It can be 350,000 to 500,000 hryvnia per month.”

They were in contact with families at the worst possible moment. I wanted to understand, did the families of the fallen want the war to end at any cost —or continue in honor of those who had died?

“It depends on the person—but mostly, people believe we must continue.”

There was one thing he had never heard.

“I have never heard a family say, ‘Give everything to Russia just to stop. Because then the sacrifice of their loved one would be for nothing.’”

Grief took many forms.

“There is anger. Sometimes people lose faith—even in God. But not the belief that Ukraine must continue.”

Oleg added something through Serhii.

“A mother once looked at a military official and said: My son is dead. Why are you still alive? Why are you not fighting?”

I asked Serhii about the people doing this work.

“One of our drivers fought for ten years, from 2014. Now he’s wounded—he can’t return to the front. So, he drives with us.”

Serhii continued on the matter of continuing the fight.

“Because if we stop on those terms, it doesn’t end.”

He spoke about what would follow.

“If territories are given up, Russia will recruit men there—force them to fight. Then they will come again. We’ve seen this before. Russia does not understand negotiation. Only force. If we stop without victory, it will be worse in three or four years.”

Oleg offered a slightly different perspective.

“Maybe there could be a pause—a freeze—with guarantees. No recognition of occupied territories. Just a stop. Maybe leadership in Russia changes. Maybe then something else becomes possible.”

Serhii didn’t sound convinced.

“History doesn’t give much reason for optimism. We’ve seen this before—in Europe, before World War II. Territories given away to avoid conflict. It didn’t stop anything.”

And the implication extended beyond Ukraine.

“If Russia is not defeated, others will be next. Ukraine has enough support not to lose—but not enough to win. That is the problem.”

The Vodka and Dance Sacraments

I have a few hours before my overnight train departs for Odesa. There is time for one tourist destination, so I head to the Menorah Center, claimed in various promotional statements to be the largest Jewish community center of its kind in the world. Big claim.

I wander around, perplexed that there’s no one to welcome or guide visitors. I approach an officious-looking desk, and the clerk apologizes and promises a tour guide if I can wait a half hour. Sure. Down the hall is the aptly named Hummus Bar with comfortable seats and, well, the hummus is pretty good, and so is the red wine.

A friendly young fellow, Mikhail, arrives and off we go through an extended tour of the facilities. There is a massive meeting room with piles of supplies; apparently, a big dinner is planned after Friday’s Shabbos prayers in the historic Golden Rose synagogue. We head up to the roof for a panoramic view of the city, where he shares favorite tourist tales and we talk about the war. I ask if I can visit the synagogue and he escorts me downstairs.

As we enter, a bearded fellow kisses the mezuzah on the door. I spent my childhood wearing a mezuzah necklace, a tiny scroll of Torah verses inside. As a show of respect, I kiss my fingers and reach to touch the mezuzah as well.

“You a Jew?” he asks.

Well, yes, I am.

Suddenly, the dynamic shifts and he pulls me to the back of this glorious house of worship and asks if I have had tefillin lately—a religious practice of

applying small black leather boxes with leather straps to the arm and forehead. I mention the last time, years earlier, living in a yoga shala on a Cambodian beach run by an Israeli couple, where I tracked down a bottle of kosher wine through a Chabad rabbi in Phnom Penh to pull off a makeshift Passover seder.

Rabbi Milman has me read daily prayers as he wraps my arm. I study the verses as I speak them. Some are lyrical and inspiring; others, theologically, not quite my lane. This is, after all, an Orthodox house, and in one passage I thank God that I was not born a woman, a gentile, or a slave.

Rabbi Milman tells me that the Chief Rabbi of Israel and the Minister of Religious Services are joining the congregation for Shabbos services and a big community dinner and invites me to come as their guest. Two thoughts immediately arise. One: he is making this up. Two senior Israeli officials here tonight? Implausible. And then: I have a train to catch—and I'd better catch it. This is high season for summer travel and the trains are booked solid.

I decline. He insists. I pause.

"OK," I tell him. "I'll go to the station and see if I can change my ticket."

He is pleased.

I take a taxi. It's hot, and no one speaks English—or at least the station clerk knows enough to say, "no way." I ask about a bus. She gestures vaguely toward another part of the station. I walk the entire complex, circling through corridors and courtyards, but find nothing. My Google Maps app sends me to an empty parking lot.

At this point, less than two hours before I need to gather my bags and get to the station, I am standing on asphalt, shirt soaked with sweat, insisting to myself that I promised never to do this again—no stressed, last-minute dashes to airport gates or stations or appointments. I have a plan, a ticket, my bags are packed, and there is no way the rabbi is really hosting the Chief Rabbi of Israel. And even if he is, I would have no access.

I call Max, my Ukrainian friend back in Thailand. I'm not sure how late it is there, but I estimate it must be approaching midnight. Can I get a bus tomorrow? He promises to check schedules, then texts back: yes, seats are

available. Not as comfortable for the long trip, but available, and he can book me for tomorrow afternoon.

I return to my hotel, grab my bags, check out, and take a taxi to the Menorah Center, where I check in. I shower and make my way to the synagogue just as services are beginning.

On the way, I post a note to friends. I see three ways to approach the evening: ask my sudden acquaintances about Israel's actions in Gaza, experience the moment as a man of Jewish ancestry, or simply participate, observe, and chronicle it. The advice that comes back is the latter two.

On the stage is a charismatic speaker, preaching in Hebrew with a Ukrainian interpreter. I know neither language, but I am impressed by his warm, exuberant, confident presence. The last time I encountered someone with this kind of evangelical charm was in Kabul, when I spent hours with Dr. Ayaz Niazi, Afghanistan's leading Islamic scholar and imam of the city's largest mosque.

I move closer.

At the end of his talk, he and others in the congregation begin to dance in a circle around a raised platform at the center of the room. He smiles as he passes, extends his hand, and pulls me into the circle.

It's a wild scene—ecstatic, communal, spontaneous.

Moments later, I learn that the man I'm dancing with is indeed Kalman Ber, the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel. I notice that the scene is all male, and when I look up, I see the women gathered on the balcony.

Inside the grand ballroom, Rabbi Milman seats me at the guest table next to Sergio, an urbane English speaker who narrates the scene and interprets. We eat well—platters of traditional Jewish and Eastern European food. And drink well. Bottles of vodka are plentiful, and it seems everyone reserves Friday for celebration after a pious week in a country at war.

Gradually, after hours of singing and hugging, the room starts to empty out.

Through the evening, I notice a serious-looking fellow accompanying Chief Rabbi Ber—young, dark-complected, with a close-shaven beard, contrasted with the bushier styles around him. I stand nearby with Milman and the

Ukrainian interpreter as he speaks with Minister of Religious Services Michael Malchieli, their conversation moving between Hebrew and Ukrainian. I understand not a word, but the meaning carries.

Whether it's the uniqueness of the moment, the vodka, or that cookie I ate hours before, I can't be sure.

I tell Milman I want to ask the Minister about his beard.

"No, no, no," he says. "Sensitive subject."

Through the interpreter, I introduce myself and say, "I've been watching you tonight. You seem deep in thought most of the time. You have a graceful style about you. And I notice your beard is different from everyone around you. Why is that?"

He laughs and explains—through translation—that Sephardic and Ashkenazi traditions approach such things differently.

Rabbi Milman then mentions that I've been to many Muslim countries but never to Israel. The Minister expresses friendly outrage and insists I come as his guest, listing places he would take me with enthusiasm.

As midnight approaches, the large ballroom empties out, leaving a dozen of us seated around a table. Rabbi Ber sits to my right, his knee pressed against mine. Periodically, one of the men jumps up, singing and clapping, drawing others in before the room settles again into conversation and drink.

I don't understand Hebrew, but the shared ecstasy is real.

The next morning brings more services, more prayer, more food, some more vodka, lots of hugging. I spend time with the Ukrainian interpreter discussing Zelensky, conscription, the path to peace, and how the Jewish community has come together again—after a long history of Russian pogroms, Nazi deportations, and Soviet persecution.

I thank Rabbi Milman, with one eye on my bus schedule.

On my way out, I say goodbye to the Minister. He is mid-conversation, so he raises his thumb and pinky to his ear in the universal phone gesture and mouths the words:

"Call me."

An hour later, I am on the road to Odesa.

Day 18: Odesa

Odesa is Ukraine's third-most populous city, famous for its 19th-century architecture, Black Sea maritime port, and the iconic Potemkin Stairs.

One hundred years ago, Sergei Eisenstein premiered his film *Battleship Potemkin*, widely regarded as the most influential film in Russian—and arguably world—cinema history.

The film tells the story of sailors mutinying against their brutal officers. During the 1905 Odesa protests supporting the mutineers, Tsar Nicholas II's troops fired on civilians. In Eisenstein's dramatized Potemkin Stairs sequence, a mother is shot, loses her grip on a baby carriage, and her infant hurtles down the staircase to the horror of onlookers—a scene that has inspired countless homages, most famously the train station sequence in The Untouchables.

The 1905 Revolution forced reforms, though the tsar's promise of a parliament (Duma) and increased civil liberties were soon undermined.

Today, I arrive in Odesa on Ukrainian Independence Day.

Independence, Intent, and the Unfinished War

I begin the day with Valerii Bolhan—editor-in-chief of *Intent*, head of the Center for Public Investigations, director of Odesa's Museum of Elections and Propaganda, and a PhD student. Intent is an independent media outlet for the southern regions of Ukraine, providing local news, investigative journalism, and analysis. One more bold, entrepreneurial journalism venture in a country that prizes its emergent free press.

I note the range of his ambitious projects. "You're busy."

He nods. "Yes… I have some roles."

I begin simply: *Independence—from what?*

Valerii pauses, then reframes the question.

“Only now,” he says, “we begin to understand what independence really means.”

For much of his life—and for much of modern Ukraine—independence was abstract, almost accidental. Ukraine became independent in 1991, but the deeper structures of dependence remained.

“We had an independent state,” he tells me, “but not independent people.”

He describes a childhood caught between identities. In school, Ukrainian language and literature were taught only a few hours per week; everything else was in Russian. Even cultural memory had been thinned out.

“I was maybe the last Young Pioneer (the Soviet answer to the Girl and Boy Scouts of America) in the Soviet Union,” he says with a faint smile. “I had two ties—one red, one blue and yellow—in the same day.”

To understand independence, Valerii insists, you have to understand what came before—and what was erased. He speaks of generations shaped by the Soviet system, some of whom accepted it as normal, stable. Those who resisted—writers, dissidents—were often imprisoned or killed.

“Only now,” he says, “we understand the hard way they lived.”

He lists names: dissidents, poets, Crimean Tatar leaders. Some survived into old age; many did not. Their stories were hidden for decades. Ukraine, he explains, wasn’t just politically controlled—it was systematically diminished.

“There were times,” he says, “when Ukrainian language and culture were present in public life. But after the 1930s, that changed.”

He refers to famine, repression, and industrialization—waves of policy that reshaped the country at enormous human cost. Entire villages disappeared, sometimes literally submerged by Soviet infrastructure projects.

“They built the station,” he says of one hydroelectric project, “but they didn’t care about the people.”

Language, Identity, and Late Awakening

Even decades after independence, the legacy persisted.

“I spoke Russian for many years,” Valerii tells me. “Only after 2014 did I begin to move toward Ukrainian.”

The turning point, like for many Ukrainians, came with war—the annexation of Crimea and the fighting in Donbas.

“And for many people,” he adds, “only after 2022.”

Identity, in Ukraine, has not been static. It has been forged through sometimes violent experience.

So what, after all this history, are Ukrainians fighting for now?

Valerii answers without hesitation.

“Now we have someone killed in almost every family,” he says. “This is our vaccine from Russia.”

He acknowledges that nostalgia for the Soviet past still exists, especially among older generations.

“They say the ice cream was better,” he says, half-smiling. “But there was only one flavor.”

Memory, he suggests, can be selective—and misleading.

What Does Success Look Like?

When I ask what a successful outcome to the war might be, he doesn’t offer slogans or certainty.

“If I don’t need to leave my country,” he says quietly, “that is success. I am afraid,” he continues, “not for myself, but for my family. My wife, my sons… even my cat. We live in this situation like it is normal. But it is not normal.”

Valerii points to a broader context.

“This war is not only about Putin,” he says. “It is about Russian imperial intention.”

Even if leadership changes, the underlying dynamic may persist. That creates a troubling horizon.

“If Russia exists like this,” he says, “we will always have danger.”

Some hope lies in internal pressures within Russia—regional tensions, economic strain—but he does not rely on that as a solution.

What, then, is realistic?

Valerii outlines a possibility that is less heroic but perhaps more achievable: a negotiated peace, even one that involves painful compromises.

“It may not be victory,” he says. “It may be peace.”

He acknowledges the risks—territorial concessions, fragile guarantees, the possibility of future conflict—but sees it as one plausible path forward. Ukraine, he notes, is exhausted. Its soldiers are tired. Its society is strained. And the postwar period may be as unstable as the war itself.

“The first year after the war,” he says, “will be very difficult. We may lose a generation,” he says bluntly, referring to the millions who have chosen to leave the country.

And yet, he holds onto something more personal.

“I have a dream,” he tells me. “My grandchildren will live here.”

Dina Shows Me Her Odesa

Dina Kazatzker organizes volunteers and activities for Odesa-based Monsters NGO, a frontline volunteer organization delivering large-scale humanitarian aid—food, clothing, and medical supplies—to civilians and communities impacted by the war. In advance of our meeting, I asked Dina if she knew anyone who might be able to lend me a guitar to play on the Potemkin Stairs for my final night in the country. She delivered two to my hotel.

During our tour of the Monsters facilities, Dina received an alert on her phone. In other interviews, a siren didn’t so much as cause a pause for my hosts. This time, she warned it was a ballistic missile alert, so I had my first descent into a basement bomb shelter, where we continued our conversation.

Brian: How many people are you supporting right now?

Dina: Two hundred people receive one kind of help, and another group also gets support—about 600 altogether.

Brian: What goes into the monthly packages?

Dina: Basic staples: pasta, tea, biscuits, canned fish, oil, rice, and sugar. Families with children receive extra items for kids, and we supply diapers as well.

Brian: When there's an air-raid alert, how do you know what kind of threat it is?

Dina: We monitor a Telegram channel. They post whether it's ballistic missiles, drones, and so on. Today they warned it might be ballistic.

Brian: How do you decide whether to shelter?

Dina: If it's ballistic, it's better to hide. We had colleagues working in a small office we rented because it was too cold at the arena. A nearby military sanatorium was hit, and the blast wave reached their building and shattered windows. After that, we became much more cautious.

Brian: That's a lot to carry day to day.

Dina: It's our reality. I'm grateful we can help, though of course it would be better if our work weren't needed. Even if the war ended tomorrow, people returning from the army would carry trauma—psychological and physical—so our work wouldn't stop; it would just change. I'm angry about the situation, but I'm not paralyzed by stress. We do what we can.

Brian: Besides food, what else do you provide?

Dina: Medicines and access to diagnostics like MRI scans for people who can't afford them. In Ukraine, you pay for everything. People are waiting for us to solve these problems. For example, funds on one of our accounts today are barely enough to cover a month of heart medication for one woman who's waiting on my call so her neighbor can pick it up.

Brian: Do donations include medical equipment?

Dina: Sometimes. Useful items arrive, but we also receive things that are expired or not usable here. We can't deploy those, and disposing of them properly costs money. Donors mean well, but it's important to send what local hospitals can actually use.

I've already imposed on Dina with the guitar loan. I mention, in passing, that I couldn't find a laundromat during my Kharkiv stay and wonder if there's a local boutique where I might pick up a few T-shirts and socks for the final leg of my trip. We stop at Staff Clothing, a popular, minimalist Odesa streetwear shop.

Dina continues her heroic rescue of my final-day needs and takes me to *She*, a small boutique to shop for a gift someone back home. I muddle through the selections until she approves a pair of earrings featuring the nightingale —Ukraine's national bird, long celebrated in folklore and song.

After a stop at a building tied to her work, we visit the Odesa Regional Universal Scientific Library named after M. S. Hrushevsky, a civic space that feels less like a traditional library than a living cultural hub, with books, exhibitions, and quiet conversation sharing the same air. After a visit with the staff, we move on to our final stop.

The Museum of the History of the Jews of Odesa is housed in a former apartment. Our host, Zvi-Girsh Blinder, takes us on a private tour through personal histories and the movement of communities across the city over centuries. Drawing on a vast archive of photographs, documents, and everyday objects, the museum traces a vital thread of Odesa's past—a modest but deeply felt institution preserving a culture that helped shape the city's identity.

I find myself again drawn into Jewish spaces through chance encounters, as this history runs through Ukraine whether you go looking for it or not.

What Survived

Brian: As you look at the history of pogroms, Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany —Jews seem to be a recurring target of persecution. Where does that come from? Why over the centuries?

Zvi-Girsh: It's not only Germany, not only the twentieth century. It goes back more than 2,000 years.

It's xenophobia. People don't like those who are different—different religion, different customs, different language. And for authorities, it is very useful. When there are internal problems, they can redirect blame. "It's not our fault—it's them." Like Hitler did in Germany.

It's a very common mechanism.

Dina: In Ukraine now, I don't really feel antisemitism the way it was maybe 20 years ago, or earlier. We know people talk about it, but in daily life—it's not something I feel strongly.

Life under Soviet Control

Zvi-Girsh: After the revolution, land was first given to peasants. But by the late 1920s, the Soviet government reversed this. They said independent farmers were not a good idea. So they collectivized everything—made collective farms.

There were also Jewish collective farms, especially in southern Ukraine, Crimea, and other regions. This was part of a larger policy: to control people; to take grain and sell it abroad; to industrialize the country; and to move people from villages into cities.

Brian: Was this also about political control?

Zvi-Girsh: Yes—but not only Ukrainians. It happened in Kazakhstan, in Siberia, among the Cossacks. It was about control everywhere. Breaking independence. Making people dependent on the state.

He points to street hardware I saw throughout Kharkiv.

This image shows the defense of Odesa in 1941. These anti-tank obstacles —"hedgehogs"—were used then.

Brian: And now they're being used again against the Russians?

Zvi-Girsh: Yes. The same idea.

We walk through the former home, each area's artifacts described as we go.

This document is a school graduation certificate—written in Ukrainian and Yiddish. In the 1920s and 30s, there was a policy to educate everyone. People were taught in their native languages. So there were schools in Ukrainian, Belarusian, and also Yiddish in places with large Jewish populations. In Odesa, there were schools where all subjects were taught in Yiddish.

Here is something unique: a handwritten textbook of electrodynamics in Yiddish. A professor translated it and taught the subject in Yiddish. Students copied it by hand.

Before World War II, Jews made up a very large part of the population. In 1920, almost half the city was Jewish. By 1989, there were about 65,000 Jews left in Odesa. After that, more emigrated—especially in the early 1990s.

Brian: After World War II, how were Jews treated in the Soviet Union?

Zvi-Girsh: There was state antisemitism—almost throughout Soviet history. From the 1920s, Zionists were persecuted. The idea of Zionism was seen as dangerous because it focused on building a future in Israel, not in the Soviet Union. After World War II, especially in the late 1940s, repression increased.

There was the “campaign against cosmopolitans.” Jews were accused of being disloyal, of having “dual loyalty.” Jewish newspapers were closed. Cultural life was restricted.

In 1952, there was the execution of members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee—writers, intellectuals. It was called the “Night of the Murdered Poets.” Later, even in the 1970s and 80s, Jews who wanted to emigrate or practice religion were harassed by the KGB.

Brian: There’s a strange irony—Nazis accused Jews of being communists, and communists accused Jews of being disloyal.

Zvi-Girsh: Yes—and another irony.

In 1941, Jews fled from the Germans to the Soviet Union—to Russia, to Central Asia. In 2022, Jews fled from Russians—to Germany and Romania.

Same people. Different direction.

Showtime at the Journey's End

I walked along Primorsky Boulevard, through the heart of Odesa's old city, toward the Potemkin Stairs, passing street performers at every turn. Then, suddenly, they reveal themselves—cascading down toward the Black Sea.

Built between 1837 and 1841 as a grand entrance from the sea into the city, the stairs were first known as the Giant Staircase, later the Richelieu Steps. Film historians tend to call them simply the Odesa Steps when referencing the iconic scene from *Battleship Potemkin*. There are 192 steps arranged in ten flights, 21 meters wide at the top, narrowing to 13 at the bottom.

Carrying my borrowed guitar, I hoped to perform the full playlist of American folk songs I had practiced for the trip. I tried to find a travel guitar in Kyiv and Kharkiv, but was frustrated by limited stock and wartime closures. I managed to perform in a Kyiv club. Now I have this private moment on the steps.

I sit midway down on the right edge and start with Bob Dylan's *When the Ship Comes In*.

For the chains of the sea
Will have busted in the night
And will be buried at the bottom of the ocean

A small crowd gathers and applauds. A young boy asks why I am here and expresses his appreciation. A teenager asks if he can play Dylan's *Knockin' on Heaven's Door*.

There is music all around. On my right, below a small overpass, an old piano where locals play casually for friends. Above me, a couple give an impromptu concert. The Black Sea, with its rich and violent history, stares back at me.

I play Sam Cooke's *A Change Is Gonna Come*, then Phil Ochs' *The Power and the Glory*. A teen from my earlier audience approaches.

"Would you like to drink Ukrainian vodka with us?"

I gather my things and join them—three young men, two young women. They ask what I am doing here, and I tell them. I ask about their lives in Odesa and how the war affects them personally.

Tanya is a student at MGU University. Her father was captured by the Russian military three years ago. She hasn't heard from him since.

I ask if she is OK. She says yes—she stays with her mother. She has to "stay strong and go on with life."

"What do you think is the way to peace for Ukraine?"

"Peace will come to Ukraine when Putin dies."

Lazar adds, "It's hard to say. Opinions are going different ways. My honest opinion is that people need to deal with other sides and stop this all."

"Good idea. But how?"

"Presidents should meet and shake hands. But it's difficult for our country—we are angry. It's understandable. Many people have died or are suffering. But we need this to end. We need to close our eyes on some things to move forward. It's hard, it's painful, but we need to understand the other side—and the other side needs to stop the fire and stop coming to our country illegally."

Lazar is studying radio and television in a university internship. Months later, he would send photos and write, "I hope we can hang out again sometime. You were one of the first people I met in Odesa, and that meeting really had a big impact on things over time."

The vodka runs low, so we go to a nearby shop for resupply and Ukrainian hot dogs.

When we return, Lazar asks if I would like to hear Ukrainian songs. I play the chords while he sings the lyrics. Eager to finish the songs I brought, I do a duet with him on Johnny Cash's *The Man in Black*. A few try to sing along to Woody Guthrie's *This Land Is Your Land*. I finish with Pete Seeger's *God Bless the Grass*.

It's Independence Day—and Tanya's birthday—ample excuses for more toasts, refills, and another song. I ask what we should give her for a present. A new car? A house? Jewelry?

"I just want to be with people," she says.

I’m 70, but I find myself remembering what it was like to be 18—carefree, uncertain about the future, open to adventure, curious. They guess my age at 52 and 53, fully satiating my ego. Lazar makes up an impromptu song about me.

I’m curious. “Okay, okay, can I ask you a question? Today is Independence Day. So for you, what does independence mean? Independence from what?”

Lazar says, “It’s a big day in Ukraine. Very big.”

Lidiia answers, “Independence for the country—but also my own independence. As a person.”

They ask what it means to me. I think back on all my encounters these past three weeks, the answers given to similar questions.

“For me, it means you’ve been suffering for a long time—under the czars, the Soviets, now Putin, and your own oligarchs. And everyone I meet wants the same thing: freedom. Of speech. Press. Religion. The rule of law. The right to choose your own future.”

Tanya refills everyone’s cups for another toast.

Midnight curfew approaches. My hotel receptionist warned me: the front door will be locked, so I better not be late. It’s 11:20, and I have a 20-minute walk back through the old city.

After hugs and promises to stay in touch, I begin walking up these grand stairs.

And I think of Gleb, a 12-year-old with a mop of black hair and big glasses.

Earlier, with his proud father standing beside him, he approached me after I performed, speaking with extraordinary confidence and passion.

“I hope you achieve your dreams to create your book about Ukraine’s life, because it’s very… it’s hard to be in Ukraine right now. There are a lot of bombs flying around and a lot of sirens. We don’t know if we’re safe or not. This is not the first time Russia attacks us. But I hope you achieve your dream.

“And we’re gonna win this war.”

I asked if he liked my makeshift performance.

“Yeah,” he said. “I loved it.”

I leave Ukraine in the morning.
He stays.

• • •

About the Author

Born in Brooklyn, New York, Brian Gruber spent 40 years studying, leading, and developing new media companies and creative projects. Hired by C-SPAN founder Brian Lamb to be the pioneering cable network's first head of marketing, he hosted two weekly national call-in shows interviewing prominent guests such as John McCain, Nancy Pelosi, and Cesar Chavez. After years as a cable TV marketing turnaround specialist, he was hired as the first head of marketing for Australia's national cable television company FOXTEL.

While consulting for the World Affairs Council, Gruber founded FORA.tv, a global thought leader network presenting the world's leading public forums; it was named by *Time* magazine as one of the fifty best sites on the web. While there, he interviewed numerous intellectuals, writers, and policy experts, from Christopher Hitchens and Norman Mailer to Malcolm Gladwell and Jim Lehrer. He also founded ShowGo.tv, which streamed live concerts from iconic jazz clubs in Brazil, the UK, Italy, and the United States.

Since leaving the startup world, Gruber has published seven books with travel themes.

Dauphin, Dorian and Dead: The Year Without a Net is a tragicomic romp through four continents that explores the ascent, descent, and aftermath of romance in midlife.

WAR: The Afterparty is a global "walkabout" to the scenes of a half century of U.S. military interventions. In addition to interviews on Fox News, C-SPAN, and public radio, the book was widely praised in reviews for its vision and editorial style. Stephen Kinzer, former *New York Times* bureau chief and one of America's leading foreign policy authors, commented, "Joining the army, according to an old proverb, gives you the chance to 'travel the world, meet interesting people, and kill them.' In this book, Brian Gruber travels the world, meets extremely interesting people, and instead of killing them, tries to understand them. His book cuts through layers of propaganda and helps us see the world's problems—and ourselves—through the eyes of others."

Six Days at Ronnie Scott's: Billy Cobham on Jazz Fusion and the Act of Creation garnered rave reviews across the jazz community. Carlo Wolff

of *Downbeat* called it, "… an unusual and welcome addition to the jazz bibliography." Geoff Nicholls of *Rhythm* magazine adds, "Well-written and thought-provoking… a challenging document of a half-century of cutting-edge musical exploration."

Surmountable: How Citizens from Selma to Seoul Changed the World chronicles the victories and setbacks of ten American and three international citizen movements from the past century. Co-written with Adam Monier Edwards, Gruber traveled across the United States and four continents to gather stories from activists, journalists, and witnesses from sites of groundbreaking protests. What was the original vision for citizen engagement of Enlightenment thinkers that inspired U.S. liberal democracy and how do we move mountains to create the kind of world we want?

Full Moon over Koh Phangan explores the Thai island's characters, communities, and magnetic appeal. What attracts Phangan's eclectic range of adventurers? What makes the island so uniquely interesting and attractive to visitors seeking a new life, transcendence, restoration or, simply, a memorable, gorgeous respite from the world? An eclectic range of longtime residents share their answers to those questions.

My Fabulous Fascist Summer Vacation explores the appeal of authoritarianism in its various forms. Traveling overland from Lisbon to Istanbul, Gruber interviews historians, activists, theorists, artists, and people on the street to sound the alarm about the creeping fascism of the Trump rightist movement. Come along for the ride and explore alternative visions for the future of the United States and the world.

Gruber is also the founder of Electric Memories, a storytelling project dedicated to preserving personal histories, family legacies, and lived experience through conversation and narrative. More on his project, books, interviews, and history can be found at electric-memories.com.